



**A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF AMIN AHSAN
ISLAHI'S APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING
THE QUR'AN**

**ABSTRACT
THESIS**

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Abstract

Since doing my Master of Arts in Islamic Studies at the University of Birmingham in England, I have become more and more convinced that the advancement of world peace depends on good relations and harmony among all the religions of the world. Persons who have a deep understanding and appreciation of different religions will be able to promote such peace and harmony. This research proposal is the expression of my desire for such a deep understanding and appreciation of Islam.

The appeal of Islahi's commentary on the Qur'an - *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* - lies in its focus on the text of the Qur'an itself rather than on the traditional commentaries and books of history that have dominated Qur'anic *tafsir* throughout the centuries. Another attractive aspect of Islahi's approach is the encouragement he gives to the reader of the Qur'an to make use of reason in the process of interpretation. Since Islahi gave such importance to the use of reason in *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*, my enquiry into his commentary will investigate the kind of logic that Islahi uses. In other words, my enquiry will examine how consistent Islahi was in his own use of reason in his commentary. I will also examine the consequences to which Islahi's way of logical thinking leads him.

It is clear that the reader is the central figure in Islahi's commentary. In fact, at many points in his commentary, Islahi draws a general conclusion only after inviting the reader to reflect (*tadabbur*) on the Qur'an. Again, the

Islahi is concerned only about the addressees living during the time of revelation and not about addressees living *after* the time of revelation.

Islahi's description of the context is based on his own interpretation of the text because he derives it entirely from the text of the Qur'an. Even his references to Arab culture express his own perception. While Islahi dismisses the traditional importance given to the "occasions of revelation", he constantly refers to the history and customs of Arab and Jewish peoples who lived before and during the time of revelation. He understands the revelation of the Qur'an as taking place within the historical, social and political circumstances and conditions of the period. But he relies on his own intuitive perception of these circumstances.

Islahi argues that the Qur'an is coherent because he finds a common theme (*'umud*) connecting all the Surahs. Islahi's argument depends on the literal application of certain words concerning the deposition of the Jews and the Christians and the victory of the Muslims in Mecca. He also finds structural links connecting the Surahs with each other.

Islahi presents the "original intention" and the "correct meaning" of the Qur'an in terms of the victory of the Muslims over the Quraysh. He relates everything in the Qur'an to this "correct meaning", according to which the mission of the Prophet (peace be upon him) was to lead the Muslim community to form an Islamic society and government. The Qur'an provides the laws for this new society. God has taken away the mandate He had given to the Jews and the Christians and transferred it to the Muslims, who are the "best community" because they promote justice and truth in

society. The perfect *din* has now been conveyed to the Muslims and the Inviolable House of Worship in Mecca has been returned to its rightful custodians. This is the vision Islahi expresses throughout his commentary.

Islahi's purpose in writing *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* is to argue that Muslims will once again experience their former success and power by adopting the action-plan outlined in the Qur'an. Islahi demonstrates from the battle of *Badr* and the battle of *Uhud* that the struggle between truth and falsity is not only a spiritual struggle but involves a political struggle as well. *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* contains a clear and a strong promise of political supremacy for the Muslims.

Since he does not offer criteria to distinguish the literal from the metaphorical use of language, Islahi is able to apply the narratives and the parables of the Qur'an to any specific agents in history that illustrate the particular message he wishes to convey. Islahi recognizes the metaphorical and symbolic way that language is used in the Qur'an but attempts, nonetheless, to arrive at the single, objective and correct meaning of the text. However, the text of the Qur'an cannot escape the influence of the reader and of the context.

Islahi makes constant use of ideas like *sunnat-i-ilahi*, *itmam-i-hujjat* and other concepts such as consolation (*tasalli*) for the Prophet (peace be upon him) and reward and punishment (*jaza o saza*) because such abstract concepts provide a synthesis of the historical narratives and so contribute to the coherence of the Qur'an. He uses such ideas as umbrella concepts to bring diverse aspects of the Qur'an together under one coherent theme.

Islahi does not respect the principles of Biblical exegesis but approaches the former Scriptures with the same principles of interpretation that he uses for the Qur'an. The result is that he often finds inexplicable contradictions between the Qur'an and the Bible.

In conclusion, there seems to be no sound basis for the distinction between the internal and the external principles of interpretation that Islahi makes in his Preface to *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*. Since human attempts to understand the Qur'an depend on personal effort, all these efforts must fall under the category of *zanni*. For example, the search for the theme ('*umud*) of each Surah requires a capacity for sustained reflection (*tadabbur*). Similarly, all the principles of interpretation that Islahi uses in his commentary should be called *zanni*.

Islahi says that the Surahs of the Qur'an form seven Surah Groups. As can readily be seen from the table of contents, I have made an analysis of each Surah from the first four Surah Groups of *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* and I have included my conclusions directly after my analysis of each Surah. I could not adopt this procedure for the last three Surah Groups due to limited space. So I have given only an overview of these remaining Surah Groups. However, the main lines of Islahi's approach to the Qur'an are clear from my discussion of the first four Surah Groups. Finally, I did not find it necessary to make a separate analysis of Surah *Al Fatihah* because Islahi links Surah *Al Fatihah* with Surah *Al Baqarah*.

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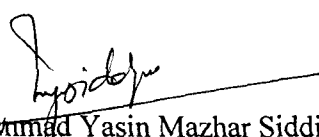
CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled:

**“A Critical Analysis of Amin Ahsan Islahi’s Approach to
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is an original work done by Herman Roborgh under my supervision.

The thesis is ready for submission for the award of Ph.D in Islamic Studies.


Prof. Dr. Muhammad Yasin Mazhar Siddiqui

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THE 19

General Introduction

The word *Tadabbur* dominates the short title of Islahi's commentary on the Qur'an, which he called *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*. The word conjures up the image of a person engaged in listening and reflecting, pondering and contemplating, weighing up and balancing the instructions and values of God's message communicated through the Qur'an, searching for the guidance that God intended, not only for the people who lived at the time of revelation but for all people. If this is the import of the word *Tadabbur* in Islahi's title, then its readers are being invited to participate in a process of interpretation that cannot be reduced to a single technique leading to preconceived conclusions, but rather to take part in a complex process that is sensitive to the different contributions the author and the reader have in discovering the wisdom of the Qur'an. The prospect of such a process captivates my interest and hopefully will sustain the interest of the readers of this dissertation as well.

The appeal of *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* is that its primary focus is on the text of the Qur'an itself rather than on the traditional commentaries and books of history that have dominated Qur'anic *tafsir* throughout the centuries. Another attractive aspect of Islahi's new approach is the encouragement he gives to the reader of the Qur'an to make use of reason (*'aql*) in the process of interpretation. Since Islahi gave such importance to the use of reason in *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*, my enquiry into his commentary will investigate the kind of logic that Islahi uses. In other words, my enquiry will examine the extent of Islahi's own consistency and the consequences to which Islahi's own way of thinking leads him. As far as possible, I will avoid the hermeneutics and epistemological theories that arose in a Western historical context. As Khaled Abou El Fadl rightly says, this kind of transplanting of theories from the West "runs the risk of imposing artificial categories upon Muslim historical and intellectual experience."¹ El Fadl, however, feels that "this does not mean that Muslim intellectuals should sanctify tradition or that they should refrain from introducing useful conceptual constructs into contemporary Muslim culture, even if these constructs originated with the West."² The point to remember is that "one should start with the Muslim

¹ Abou El Fadl (2003), p. 99.

² Op. cit.

experience” and then carefully consider how concepts from the West could be usefully employed.³ I will, therefore, always make an effort to approach *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* from the inside, as it were, and to understand Islahi's intended meaning.⁴

Islahi himself, in the *Preface* to his commentary, stresses the special difficulty a person living today has to interpret the Qur'an. Clearly, those who listened to the Qur'an at the time of revelation had no trouble understanding the language that was being used because they were well acquainted with the context about which the Qur'an was speaking. They were acquainted with the allusions and figures of speech that the Qur'an was using. The present day reader of the Qur'an, however, is living in conditions greatly removed from that context. Hence the work of interpretation will not be easy but will, on the contrary, demand much intellectual effort.⁵

Furthermore, to understand the Qur'an, it will not be satisfactory to find out simply how Qur'anic verses are interrelated, thereby deriving some practical rules for living. It will be much more important to discover the wisdom of the Qur'an, the original intention of its message and the fundamental purpose of religion (*din*) (cf. *ibid*). For example, Islahi refers to the essence and spirit of *din* (*maghaz-i-din aur ruh-i-din*, vol. 1, p. 428) and the original purpose of prayer (*namaz . . . ka asl maqsud*, *ibid*). He says that verse 177 of Surah *Al Baqarah* clarifies the original meaning of piety (*birr o taqwa ki asli haqiqat wazeh karne ke ba'd*, *ibid*, p. 430), the original purpose of the

³ Cf. *ibid*.

⁴ Farahi was writing just after the time of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, who had responded to the challenge to Qur'anic studies presented by the new scientific methodologies coming from the West. It is arguable that Farahi and Islahi themselves were so concerned with the impact of Western thought patterns in the Muslim world that they were motivated to find an approach to Qur'anic exegesis that would enable Muslims to understand the Qur'an as an integrated whole rather than as the disjointed, fragmented book that some Westerners of that period considered it to be.

In his keynote address to a seminar, Mohd. Riaz Kirmani argued for a conditioned openness to knowledge obtained through modern science in order to understand the Qur'an. Cf. Kirmani (2003), p. 21 & p. 23. It seems to me that such an attitude would allow disciplines like modern hermeneutics and epistemological theory to make their specific contributions to the interpretation of the Qur'an.

Furthermore, in a paper entitled "Method of Thematic Interpretation of the Qur'an", Hassan Hanafi is of the opinion that "Since thematic interpretation uses a philosophical language and some technical vocabulary related to phenomenology, it could be quickly accused of being the victim of westernization. But do humanism, rationalism, criticism, activism really belong to the West . . . ? Western philosophical vocabulary in the last two centuries became commonplace in Arab and Muslim discourse. A similar thing happened when Greek terminology influenced the classical philosophical lexicon. But if the modern philosophical vocabulary including phenomenology is used here, it is used as a means of expression only. The content is endogenous. What Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were for the Ancients, Kant, Hegel, and Husserl may well be for the moderns." Hanafi in Wild (1996), p. 211.

⁵ Cf. Islahi (1985), p. 23. Henceforward, my references to *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* simply mention the volume.

pilgrimage (*hajj se asl maqsud*, ibid, p. 474, the prophetic intention of establishing the Inviolable House of Prayer (*bait allah . . . risalat muhammadi ka asli nasab al'ain*, ibid, p. 476) and the original purpose of establishing the laws (*asl maqsud in tamam ahkam se taqwa hai*, ibid, p. 484). Clearly, Islahi's aim in *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* is to determine the original intention and meaning of the Qur'an.

It is also clear that the reader is the central figure in Islahi's commentary. In fact, at many points in his commentary, Islahi draws a general conclusion only after inviting the reader to reflect (*tadabbur*) on the Qur'an (*quran ke tadabbur se ye haqiqat wazeh hoti hai*, ibid, 453). Again, the order in which the Surahs appear is not a matter of their length but of their *meaning* (*hamare nazdik is ka ta'lluq ma'ni o matalib se hai*, vol. 2, p. 13) - a meaning that the *reader* can discover. Moreover, the reader of the Qur'an cannot remain satisfied with the way others before him have interpreted the Qur'an but must make his own personal effort to understand. This is the reason why Islahi refers to earlier commentaries on the Qur'an only after the reader has made every effort to determine the meaning of the text⁶. *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* is the fruit of Islahi's own efforts to read and ponder over the Qur'an and he invites his readers to do likewise.

The reader must also be involved in the discovery of the central idea ('*umud*) of a Surah. Islahi formulates the central idea on the basis of a thematic reading of the text. However, the thematic reading that Islahi proposes will, in turn, be influenced by the assumptions and presuppositions of the reader of *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*. Even Farahi and Islahi came to different conclusions about the '*umud* of many Surahs.⁷ What will prevent a subsequent scholar from reaching his or her own conclusions about the central idea or theme of a Surah? It is true that Farahi and Islahi did not claim to provide the one and only correct version of the '*umud*. Perhaps they did not sufficiently appreciate the contribution of the reader to the understanding of the Qur'an. They may not have fully realized that every reader brings his or her own context (which is external to the Qur'an) into the process of interpretation and that the reader's beliefs, values, assumptions, choices, and insights must have an influence on the formulation of the '*umud*. In short, what kind of

⁶ Islahi says that, instead of following the usual procedures followed by interpreters of the Qur'an, namely, to refer to previous commentaries, *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* will take a more direct approach by having recourse to the text itself (*barah-i-rast fahm-i-quran ke asli wasail o zari'e*, vol. 1, p. 42). Islahi hopes that the reader would examine the text according to its own fundamental logic (*log is ke asasi dalail ki kasuti par kas kar qabul karen ya rad karen*, ibid).

⁷ Mir (1983), p. 92

role does *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* give to its readers and to the reader of the Qur'an? I hope that my investigations will highlight the important role played by the author of *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* and the inevitable contribution of its readers.

Islahi holds that the three *internal* principles of interpretation (*jo khud quran ke andar maujud hain*, vol. 1, p. 13)⁸ are sufficient to establish that the Qur'an is coherent. In his study of Islahi's concept of coherence, Mustansir Mir has explained that the six *external* principles (*jo quran se bahir ke hain*, *ibid*) serve only to confirm the presence of the coherence of the Qur'an that has already been clearly demonstrated by the internal principles.⁹ This may be the reason why Mir did not consider it necessary to deal with the external principles in any detail. However, I am interested in these external principles because Islahi, by including these principles in his commentary, invites the reader to raise the important question as to how external factors also contribute to the process of understanding the Qur'an. How does Islahi use these external principles in his commentary and what kind of importance does he give them? In his discussion of Surah Group Four, Islahi seems to say that material from outside the Qur'an is not needed or at least should be used with great caution in the interpretation of the Qur'an.¹⁰

Islahi's approach to the Qur'an consists of applying certain guidelines, some of which he takes from the long tradition of *tafsir* in Islam and others that he develops from the insights of his teacher, Maulana Farahi. These "principles of interpretation" express the ideas and convictions that Islahi has found helpful and which he suggests may be useful for the reader or reciter of the Qur'an. In fact, the word that Mir translates as "principles" is not *usul* in Urdu, as one would have expected, but *was'il*. Mir explains his translation of the word as follows:

We will first state the exegetical principles of Farahi and Islahi, and then compare them with the exegetical principles Muslim scholars have generally held to. But first a note on the word 'principles'. One

⁸ The three *internal* principles are coherence (*nazm al quran*), language (*zaban*) and Qur'anic parallels (*nazair*). Cf. vol. 1, p. 13. The six *external* principles are: well-known and living tradition (*sunna*), recorded traditions of the Prophet and his Companions (*hadith*), occasions of revelation, previous commentaries on the Qur'an, former Scriptures and the history of Arabic peoples. Cf. *ibid*.

⁹ Discussing the internal and the external principles of interpretation, Mir writes: "The former are primary and irreducible, and suffice for the purpose of arriving at the basic Qur'anic interpretation. The latter are secondary in importance, are theoretically dispensable, and should be used only insofar as they are in concord with, or at least do not contradict, the former." Mir (1983), p. 44.

¹⁰ Cf. my discussion of this point in the last section of Surah *Al-Ahzab* in chapter four.

of the expressions Islahi uses for the 'principles' of exegesis is *was'a'il*, literally, 'means' or 'sources'. In the following pages, the word 'principles' is used as an equivalent of the word *was'a'il*.¹¹

This comment from Mir brings out a certain lack of clarity regarding the phrase "principles of interpretation", which Islahi considers to be based on the ideas of his teacher, Maulana Farahi. In fact, Islahi says that his ideas do not differ from those of his teacher, Farahi, but simply clarify and develop them (*mera fikr mere ustaz ke fikr se koi alag chiz nahin hai balke ustaz marhum hi ke fikr ki tawazeh o takmil hai*, vol. 9, p. 7). Has Islahi succeeded in clarifying the principles of interpretation he adopted from his teacher, Farahi?

Islahi says that he has presented a new approach to the Qur'an in his commentary (*is kitab mein quran par ghaur karne ki rah mai ne khul di hai . . . mai ne quran ko samajhne ke liye sirf rah hamwar ki hai*, vol. 9, p. 12). According to Islahi, readers of his commentary considered his approach to be a scientific one (*yahi tariqa quran par ghaur karne ka scientific tariqa hai*, *ibid*, p. 11) and that no other method of interpretation will appeal to modern people (*is ke siwa koi aur tariqa is zamane ke logon ko appeal nahin kar sakta*, *ibid*). In this study, I shall investigate whether Islahi's approach to the Qur'an can be considered scientific and whether or not it would appeal to modern readers.

Furthermore, Islahi expresses a wish that his commentary be analyzed and evaluated according to its merits (*mai chahta hun ke log kitab ko khud is ki salahiyaton ki raushni mein janchen aur parkhen*, *ibid*). Moreover, since the truth is not a monopoly of any particular person, anyone is able to analyze it (*haq ek mutai-i-mushtarik hai jis par kisi ka ajarah nahin*, *ibid*, p. 13). For this reason, I feel no hesitation in taking up Islahi's invitation to evaluate *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*.

The main aim of *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* is to clarify the original intention (*har ayat . . . ka asl mudd'a wazeh karne ke liye*, vol. 1, p. 41) of the Qur'an in order to obtain its correct meaning (*ayat ka sahih mahfum*, *ibid*). Islahi repeats the same intention in the preface to the last volume of his commentary (*dalail ki roshni mein har ayat ki ek ma'yyan tawil samne rakhi gayi hai*, vol. 9, p. 8). Once the correct meaning has been established, it is the task of the reader to transfer this one, correct meaning into the present

¹¹ Mir (1983), p. 42.

context (*ek zahin qari is ke muta'llaqat ko khud akhaz kar sakta hai*, *ibid*). I would like to question whether the Qur'an can have one correct meaning and whether it is possible to discover this one correct meaning of the Qur'an.¹²

Moreover, Islahi establishes the correct meaning by examining the addressees to whom the verses were directed. By focusing on the specific addressees in this way, however, Islahi seems to have lost the universal meaning of the Qur'an. How does one transfer the "correct meaning" derived from the specific context of certain addressees in the past to a completely different context in the present? Apart from a few remarks about the need to adapt to the changed conditions of the present world, Islahi does not pay much attention to this question.¹³

Take, for example, Islahi's analysis of Surah *Al Baqarah*, verse 143, which invites Muslims "to be a community of the middle way".¹⁴ Islahi begins by saying that the verse is limited to those Muslims who were living at the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and who were being led astray by the Jews and Christians of that time. Yet the verse could also be understood as addressing *all believers* who subsequently came to believe in the message of the Qur'an. For it is the responsibility of *all believers*, including those living after the time of the Prophet, as Islahi also says, to give witness to the *din* of God in all periods, to every people and in every language (*ab ye is ummat ki zimmadari hai ke wo har daur, har mulk aur har zaban mein logon par allah ke din ki gawahi de*, vol.1, p. 365). The verse cannot, therefore, be restricted to the Muslims living at the time of revelation.

Similarly, Islahi says that verse 148 of the same *Surah*, which discusses the direction of prayer (*qibla*), applies to specific groups of people, namely, the Jews and the Christians living in the past. Yet, in his general conclusion, Islahi says that the direction of prayer is a symbolic way of saying that people everywhere can turn in this direction and that God gathers all these people to himself (*har shakhs har jagah is se rabt qaim kar sakta hai aur allah ta'ala is se ta'lluq rakhne walon ko har jagah se jama' kar sakta hai*,

¹² Farahi says that the concept of coherence provides the Qur'anic text with its correct *direction* (*nazm kalam hi, kalam ke sahih samt ko muta'in karne wali wahid chiz ho sakti hai*). Farahi (1990), p. 31. This is rather different from saying, as Islahi does, that there is one correct meaning of the text.

¹³ Abdul Kabur Husain Solihu alludes to this problem as follows: "To single out the non-historical aspects of the Qur'an may be charged with attempting to portray the Qur'an as stagnant, lacking the sequential nature of history. On the other hand, reading the Qur'an from an historical perspective may be seen as an attempt to confine its universal message to a particular period in history." Solihu (2003), p. 399.

¹⁴ Throughout this study, I make use of the translation of the Qur'an provided by Muhammad Asad (1980).

ibid, p. 374). In this instance, Islahi moves beyond the specific context of the verses to provide a universal understanding for this passage. More often, however, Islahi is more concerned with the specific addressees of the past than with the universal meaning of the verses.

Another example can be taken from the instructions to implement *jihad* in verses 190 – 193 of Surah *Al Baqarah*. According to Islahi, these verses describe the specific context of the Quraysh, who were preventing the Muslims from entering the sacred precincts of the mosque that Abraham had built (*is ka ta'lluq khas kuffar quraysh se hai*, vol. 1, p. 476).¹⁵ Furthermore, Islahi does not consider the universal significance of verses 28-29 of Surah *Al Ahzab* concerning the wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him).¹⁶ What is the universal meaning of verses such as these?

A further aspect of *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* that emerges in the discussion of almost every Surah is that of the different kinds of language used in the Qur'an. Islahi recognizes the metaphorical and symbolic way that language is used in the Qur'an but attempts, nonetheless, to arrive at the single, objective and correct meaning of the text. However, the text of the Qur'an cannot escape the influence of the reader and of the context.¹⁷

As can readily be seen from the table of contents, I have made an analysis of each Surah from the first four Surah Groups of *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*. I have presented my conclusions directly after the analysis of each Surah. Due to limited space, I have given only an overview of the remaining Surah Groups. However, the main lines of Islahi's approach to the Qur'an will have become clear in my discussion of the first four Surah Groups. Finally, I did not find it necessary to dedicate a separate chapter to Surah *Al Fatihah* because Islahi links Surah *Al Fatihah* with Surah *Al Baqarah*.

¹⁵ Javed Ahmad Ghamidi reaches similar conclusions after analyzing verse 9 of Surah 61. After translating the verse, he writes: "From this translation it is clear that 'prevail over all (false) religion' has no relationship with any person's contemporary struggle. The addressees of Surah *As-Saff* were the Companions of the Prophet and this verse was about inducing them to assist the Prophet in his struggle (*jihad*)". He concludes: "After the time of the Prophet until the Last Day, no one any longer has the right to apply the demands and implications of this verse to his own personal struggle (*jihad*)."¹⁵ Ghamidi (2001), pp. 138-139.

¹⁶ Moreover, Islahi does not raise the issue of the universal significance of verses 28-29 of Surah *Al Ahzab*, which are related to the Prophet's wives (*ham yahan is surah ki roshni mein waqt ke baz khas halat ki taraf isharah karenge jin se in ayat ka sahih mauqa' o mahal samajhne mein madad milegi*, vol. 6, p. 216).

¹⁷ Abdullah Saeed identifies three types of text used in the Qur'an: text related with the Unseen (*ghayb*), historical text and text that conveys parables (*mathal*). None of these types of text, according to Saeed, provides a simple path to the objective meaning of the Qur'an. Cf. Abdullah Saeed (2006), pp. 91-101.

Surah Al Baqarah

Introduction

1. Link with the Previous Surah

Islahi mentions a few points that link Surah *Al Fatihah* with the two Surahs that follow it, namely, Surah *Al Baqarah* and Surah *Al 'Imran*.

1. Surah *Al Baqarah* is linked to its predecessor, Surah *Al Fatihah* in the way that the answer to a prayer is linked to the prayer itself (*donon suraton mein wohi ta'lluq hai jo ta'lluq ek du'a aur is ke jawab . . . hota hai*, vol. 1, p. 71). It is quite clear that the last line of Surah *Al Fatihah* leads into the opening words of Surah *Al Baqarah* (cf. *ibid*). The prayer seeking for guidance in the first Surah receives an immediate response in the opening words of the Surah following it.
2. Surah *Al Fatihah* also contains a prayer asking for deliverance from groups that have gone astray (*gumrah grohon ke tariqon se bachae janey ki bhi du'a hai*, *ibid*). With this prayer in mind, readers of Surah *Al Baqarah* will notice the reference to the misdeeds of the Jews (*yahud ke in tamam juraim ki fahrist bhi bayan hui hai*, *ibid*) and understand that God's anger leads to the Jews being deprived of their leadership of the nations (*khuda ka ghazab nazil ho aur wo qaumon ki imamat ke mansub se ma'zul kiye jaye*, *ibid*). In other words, Surah *Al Fatihah* alludes briefly to the two groups that the following two Surahs will deal with at length (cf. *ibid*).
3. Just as Surah *Al Baqarah* describes the misdeeds of the Jews, Surah *Al 'Imran* will describe the mistaken ways taken by the Christians (*nisara ki bida'ton aur in ki gumrahiyon ki tardid ki gayi hai*, *ibid*, p. 72).

2. The Theme of the Surah

The basic topic of this Surah is the call to faith (*is surah ka markazi mazmun da'wat-i-iman hai*, *ibid*, p. 75). Islahi says that the faith mentioned in Surah *Al Fatihah* is based on the evidence for God found in the world (*allah ta'ala ki rububiyat o rahmat ki nishaniyan*, *ibid*). The present Surah presents a detailed and clear call to faith in the Prophet and in the Qur'an. In short, in

the previous Surah the focus was on faith in God (*iman bilallah*, ibid) and in the present Surah the focus is on faith in Prophethood (*iman birisalat*, ibid). The two must come together (cf. ibid) and the latter is a natural outcome of the former (*fitri natijah hai*, ibid). Faith in God leads to a desire to receive his guidance (*is ke rastah ki talash hai*, ibid) and to a call to believe in the Book and in the Prophet who received the Book (*is kitab par aur is rasul par iman lao jis par ye kitab utri*, ibid).

3. The Addressees of the Surah

The Surah is primarily addressed to the Jews who considered that they were the people who were to be entrusted with leadership of the nations (*paidaishi haqdar-i-amanat o siyadat samjhe baithe they*, ibid, p. 76). The Surah rejects all their claims and superstitions (cf. ibid).

The Prophet is encouraged to stand firm and reminded that the prayer made by the Prophet Abraham when he built the Inviolable House of Worship has been answered in the coming of the Last Prophet whose invitation to faith will be heard (*ap ki da'wat kamyab ho ke rahegi*, ibid) and whose religion will prevail (*ap ke din ko ghalib karega*, ibid).

In order that God may provide the complete and perfect evidence for faith (*din ki hujjat tamam karne ke liye*, ibid), the Muslims are informed that God will make them a permanent community of faith (*mustaqil ummat ki haisiyat se mamur kiya hai*, ibid) and will entrust them with God's final law (*apni akhri shari'at ka in ko amin banaya hai*, ibid). Moreover, the Muslims are told they should appreciate the confidence placed in them and that they should exercise leadership in such a way that it will be an example for those who come after them (*apne ba'd walon ke liye namuna aur misal ban saken*, ibid).

The original religion of Abraham (*asl din-i-ibrahimi*, ibid) is proclaimed to the Ishmaelites and they are freed of the superstitions and corruption that the unbelievers and the Jews had caused to spread among them. Moreover, it is a great grace from God that he made the Last Prophet appear from among them and that he formed them into a single Muslim community (*ek ummat muslimah*, ibid). They are urged not to let the jealousy of the Jews affect them (cf. ibid).

Finally, Islahi gives a summary of the meaning of each section of the Surah because he says that this will assist in revealing the way in which the various parts of the Surah are joined together and provide an overview of the Surah as a whole (*is ke har hissah ka ta'lluq bhi samajhne mein madad milegi aur surah par bahaisiyat majmu'i ek ijmalī nazar bhi par jaegi*, *ibid* p. 77). Besides, by viewing the Surah as a whole, the theme ('*umud*) will become clear (cf. *ibid*).

Din in History

In his introduction to the group of verses 122-141, Islahi combines the two words *din* and *islam* in one phrase (*din-i-islam*, *ibid*, p. 318). Such a phrase raises several questions. Firstly, what is the specific meaning of each word in this phrase and how do they combine to form one concept? Since Islahi excludes Judaism and Christianity from this phrase, a further question concerns the meaning of *din* in both Judaism and Christianity and the relation of the *din* in Islam with the *din* in Judaism and Christianity. Islahi complicates these matters by using two other terms (*hidayat* and *mazhab*) to express the conviction of the Jews that they were also the descendants of the Prophet Abraham (*hidayat in ki hidayat aur mazhab in ka mazhab*, *ibid*, p. 317).

Islahi traces the origin of *din* from its origins at the time of the Prophet Abraham through the history of all the Prophets up to the last Prophet (peace be upon him) (*tamam nabion aur tamam rasulon ka din hai*, *ibid*, p. 318). Islahi describes the historical development of *din* by identifying the various stages that I summarize below.¹⁸

1. After the Prophet Abraham had passed through many trials, God bestowed leadership on him (*imamat o peshwai*) by means of the attributes he received from God. God will bestow these attributes on his descendants (*in ki zuriyat*) after they have passed through similar trials. Hence, their status as the descendants of Abraham does not stem from their membership of a clan or a family but is conferred on them because they share the attributes that Abraham received (*ye mansub tamam tar sifat par mabni hai, is ka koi ta'lluq bhi nasab aur khandan se nahin*).

¹⁸ The following eight points can be found in *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*, vol. 1, pp. 318-319.

2. The house of God became the center for all the descendants of Abraham but God entrusted its custodianship to Abraham and Ishmael (*is ki tauliyat supurd hui*).
3. After building the house of God, Abraham and Ishmael prayed that a muslim community (*ummat muslimah*) would be formed and that a Prophet would emerge from among them.
4. Their prayer resulted in the rise of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), who proclaimed the formation of an "Abrahamic community".¹⁹ Those who claim to be members of this community but do not take their membership seriously (*in ki da'wat se grez ikhiyar kar rahe hain*), make of themselves a laughing stock (*wo khud apne ap ko bewaquf tahra rahe hain*).
5. This Islamic community (*millet islam*) became the heritage of successive Prophets and their followers who lived and died within it (*isi millet par jinne aur isi millet par marne ka hazrat yaqub se ahd kiya*).
6. The Jews and the Christians should drop their prejudices and join this community (*is millet ibrahimi ki pairwi karen*) by accepting the *din* of *islam* (*din-i-islam*), which was the *din* of all the Prophets and Messengers (*tamam nabiyon aur tamam rasulon ka din tha*). They should adopt the nature of *islam* (*islam ke rang*) for this is the nature of God (*yahi rang allah ka rang hai*). It is distinct from the nature of Judaism and Christianity (*na ke yahudiyat aur nasraniyat*). Those who seek something other than the nature of *islam* are setting up a separate party (*jo log is rang se alag koi rang ikhtiyar karna chahta hai wo allah aur is ke rasulon se alag apni parti banane ke darpe hai, ibid*).
7. It is inconceivable that any of the Prophets was either a Jew or a Christian. God knows better than those who hold this view because God knows the religion of the Prophets (*nabion ke din o mazhab*).
8. The ancestors on whom you rely have passed away. No one can claim whatever is to their credit and no one stands accountable for their deeds.

The different words that Islahi uses to denote the various stages of the community's development: *zuriyat ibrahim*, *millet-i-ibrahim*, *ummat*

¹⁹ Islahi uses the term "millet" in the sense of "community". An example of the same usage from another context can be found in his discussion of verse 51 of Surah *Al Maidah* where he says that the Muslims should form themselves as one community (*jis tarah wo musalmanon ke khilaf bahaisiyat jama't millet-i-wahidah hai isi tarah musalman in ke muqabil mein millet-i-wahidah banen*, vol. 2, p. 543).

muslimah, *millet islam*, *din-i-islam*, *akhri millet* and the completion of religion: *takmil-i-din* (ibid, p. 377) seem to indicate a certain development in *din*. Finally, in verse 3 of Surah *Al Maidah*, the word for religion is “*islam*”. Do these different terms indicate a substantial development in the religion of Abraham from one period of history to another? In his discussion of verse 48 of Surah *Al Maidah*, Islahi says that *shari'at* and *minhaj* may be different from one believing community to another but the truths of *din* remain the same (*jahan tak din ke haqiq ka ta'lluq hai wo hamesha se ghair mutaghayyar hain*, vol. 2, p. 535). The conclusion must be that the *din* of the Jews and the Christians is the same as the *din* of the Muslims. However, Islahi elevates the Muslim community with the possession of the perfect *din*.

For example, while Islahi rejects the notion that *islam* is a separate “party”, he refers to the supremacy of God’s party in his discussion of *Al Maidah* (*wo allah ki parti banenge aur yahi parti bilakhir ghalib hogi*, vol. 2, p. 537). From the overall context, it is clear that “God’s party” is a phrase used for the Muslims. Moreover, Islahi stated earlier that the frequent Qur’anic phrase “those who believe” refers to the Muslims as a group or community (*musalman bahaisiyat ek groh aur jama't*, ibid, p. 236). On the basis of verse 62, however, Islahi says that any group consisting either of Muslims, Jews, Christians or *Sabians*, is equal in the sight of God (*bahaisiyat ek groh ke sab barabar hai*, ibid). Only faith and good works will find favour with God. On the other hand, Islahi gives a special place to Muslim believers since he says that God raised up the Muslim community to bring about a complete renewal in the world (*khuda ne dunya ke islah ke liye akhri millet aur khair ummat ki haisiyat se mab'aus firmaya hai*, ibid, pp. 236-237). Yet even the role of the Muslim community cannot be accomplished without faith and good works (*lekin iman aur 'amal saleh se alag ho kar in ke liye bhi khuda ke han koi maqam nahin hai*, ibid, p. 237).

Islahi defines the meaning of *islam* on the basis of verse 112:

Yea, indeed: everyone who surrenders his whole being unto God, and is a doer of good withal, shall have his reward with his Sustainer; and all such need have no fear, and neither shall they grieve.

Islahi comments that only two things are important, first to become a person who surrenders his life to God (*muslim*) and second to be a person who does good works (*admi ek to muslim bane dusre ye ke muhsin bane*, ibid, p. 301). Instead of mentioning membership of a group or community, Islahi stresses complete self-surrender to God (*islam ke ma'ni ye hai ke admi apne ap ko pure taur par khuda ke hawalah kar de*, ibid). It seems that such an attitude

of surrender to God could occur in any religious group, be they Jews, Christians or *Sabians*. Whoever has faith and does good works will live in heaven, “whatever group be happens to belong to” (*khwa is ka ta'lluq kisi khandan se ho*, *ibid*, p. 256).

Moreover, on the basis of verse 121, Islahi says that the People of the Book also find guidance:

Those unto whom We have vouchsafed the divine writ (and who) follow it as it ought to be followed – it is they who (truly) believe in it; whereas all who choose to deny its truth – it is they, they who are the losers!

Islahi argues that any person from among the People of the Book who correctly follows the truth contained in his or her own Scriptures believes in the guidance of God, which the last Prophet (peace be upon him) came to affirm (*jo ahl kitab apni kitab ka haq sahih tariqa par ada karte rahe hain wohi is hadi allah par iman layenge*, *ibid*, p. 308).

Verses 127-129 indicate that, at a most crucial and historical moment in time (*tarikhi mauqa'*, *ibid*, p. 338), just as they were completing their mission, the Prophet Abraham and Ishmael prayed that they might become true Muslims rather than Jews or Christians (*muslim banae jane ki thi na ke yahudi ya nasrani banae janey ki*, *ibid*). It seems that the word “Muslim”, in this context, is not to be understood as indicating membership of a particular group (a connotation that Islahi gives to the terms “Christian” and “Jew”) but describes an attitude of surrender or submission to God. Islahi says that Abraham gave expression to *islam* by word and deed, not by becoming a member of Judaism or Christianity (*islam ka mazahirah kiya na ke yahudiyat ya nasraniyat*, *ibid*, p. 343). In other words, *islam* need not be understood as referring to a separate group or separate religion in the way Jews and Christians fashioned their religion. Perhaps Islahi’s use of the term *millet islam* in his comment on verse 132 should be understood in the sense of “total surrender to God” rather than as indicating membership of a separate group:

And this very thing did Abraham bequeath unto his children, and (so did) Jacob: “O my children! Behold, God has granted you the purest faith; so do not allow death to overtake you ere you have surrendered yourselves to Him.”

Islahi says that the word *al dinan* from the above verse²⁰ refers to the Islamic community (*millet islam*), which is another way of referring to Islam itself (*jis millet ki haqiqat ka unhone mazahirah kiya, wo islam hai*, *ibid*, p. 344). Islahi traces the appearance of *din* in history and uses different words to describe the guidance that came through each successive Prophet (*har nabi ke zamane mein din ke rasum o zawahar mein bahut se tabdilian huen*, *ibid*, p. 366). Although verse 3 of Surah *Al Maidah* announces that *islam* is the perfect religion (*al islama dinan*), the word *islam* must be understood in the light of the other phrases that have been used at different times in the history of *din*. The common aspect of all these expressions for *din* is expressed by verse 3 of *Al Maidah* as “self-surrender”:

Today have I perfected your religious law for you, and have bestowed upon you the full measure of My blessings, and willed that self-surrender unto Me shall be your religion.

Islahi concludes his historical analysis with the exclusivist claim that God gave the true *din* only to the Muslim community in Medina (*na us ne islam ke siva kisi aur din ko pasind firmaya na ummat muslimah ke siva koi ummat banani chahi. is ke han din sirf islam aur ummat sirf ummat muslimah hai*, *ibid*, p. 503). Islahi arrives at such exclusivist language by using *din* and *Islam* interchangeably.²¹ Islahi announces that now (*ab*) this new community of believers will give the final and perfect expression to the original guidance that God has been giving throughout the ages (*ab is ummat ko jo shari'at mili hai wo khuda ki asl hidayat ko is ki akhri aur mukamal shakl mein pesh karti hai*, *ibid*, p. 348).

Different Kinds of Language

At first sight, Islahi seems to prefer a physical or *literal* interpretation of verse 54:

‘O my people! Verily, you have sinned against yourselves by worshipping the calf; turn, then, in repentance to your Maker and mortify yourselves; this will be the best for you in your Maker’s

²⁰ It is noteworthy that Muhammad Asad translates the word *al dinan* from this verse as “the purest faith”.

²¹ One illustration of his use of *din* and *Islam* interchangeably appears in his discussion of the relationship between man and woman. Islahi refers to Islamic codes (*islam ke 'aili kawanin*, *ibid*, p. 533) and says that the Western way of understanding will destroy *din* (*pura din muharafho kar rah jaye*, *ibid*). Another example is evident in the sentence: “There is a complete system of punishments in *Islam* that is made compulsory by *din*” (*islam mein hudud o ta'zirat ka ek pura nizam hai jis ka nafaz wajibat-i-din mein se hai*, *ibid*, p. 593).

sight.’ And thereupon He accepted your repentance: for, behold, He alone is the Acceptor of Repentance, the Dispenser of Grace.

Whereas Muhammad Asad translates the phrase from the above verse: *fa aqtulu anfusakum* as: “mortify yourselves”, Islahi’s translation reads, “kill your criminals with your own hands” (*apne mujrimon ko apne hathon qatl karo*, ibid, p. 206). He quotes Exodus 32, 25-30 and selects an interpretation of this passage from the Torah that fits his interpretation of the passage from the Qur’an:

When Moses saw that the people were out of hand – for Aaron had let them get out of hand to the derision of their enemies all around them – Moses then stood at the gate of the camp and shouted, ‘Who is for Yahweh? To me!’ And all the Levites rallied round him. He said to them, ‘Yahweh, God of Israel, says this, “Buckle on your sword, each of you, and go up and down the camp from gate to gate, every man of you slaughtering brother, friend and neighbour.”’ The Levites did as Moses said, and of the people about three thousand men perished that day. ‘Today’, Moses said, ‘you have consecrated yourselves to Yahweh, one at the cost of his son, another of his brother; and so he bestows a blessing on you today.’

Clearly, Islahi gives this quotation from Exodus to support his interpretation of the Qur’anic verse, which recommends the execution of those criminals. In fact, Islahi gives three reasons based on the history of Islam (*tarikh islam mein*, ibid, p. 214) indicating that the punishment of execution (*qatl*, ibid) should be implemented regarding those who were responsible for the enormous sin of *shirk* (*ta ke . . . log sabaq hasil karen ke shirk itna bara gunah hai ke is ma’amlah mein bap bete ko aur beta bap ko bhi ma’af karne wala nahin hai*, ibid). Islahi even tries to draw a general principle from the words:

this will be the best for you in your Maker’s sight.

Islahi says that if a group clings to *shirk* for the sake of family ties or patriotism (*khandani jazbat aur qaumi muhabat ke josh mein*, ibid, p. 215), it will become totally corrupted. The existence of a group cannot depend on such family ties but must be based on doctrines and principles (*ek jama’t ke sath agar in usulon ke mukhalif bhi mahz nasli ta’lluq ki bana par chapke rahen to wo puri jama’t tabah ho ke rahti hai*, ibid, p. 215). Islahi does not explain what these doctrines or principles would be and whether or not their formulation could change according to the changes that occur in society.

For Islahi, verses 258-260 describe events and dialogues that actually took place, though he says that the second narrative, in verses 259-260, resembles

the kind of comparison found in verses 17-20 (*is taqsim ki misal isi surah ki ayat 17-20 mein guzar chuki hai*, *ibid*, p. 601). It seems that Islahi's main concern here is to connect the story with some specific people or events in history in the way that the parables of verses 17-20 were connected directly with the Jews. All these narratives are meant to convince the characters, which appear in them, of the certainty of life after death.

In the first narrative (verse 258), it is the Prophet Abraham who convinces the king about life after death. This king is commonly understood to be *Tamrud* (cf. *ibid*, p. 599). In the second narrative (verse 259), Islahi says that it is the Prophet Ezekiel who is encouraged in his faith to believe in the revival of the people of Israel. Islahi highlights the phrase:

And We did all this so that We might make thee a symbol unto men. Islahi explains that these words apply to the Jews (*tum bani israil ke liye is bat ki nashani ban saku*, *ibid*, p. 604). The third narrative is about the birds that came flying back to Abraham and is meant to bring inner peace to the Prophet (*itminan-i-qalb aur sharah dada*, *ibid*, p. 607). This is also considered to be an event that actually happened in the life of the Prophet Abraham (*ye in mushahidat mein se hai jo zati taur par hazrat ibrahim ko allah ta'ala ki taraf se is liye karae gaye*, *ibid*, p. 607).

The two parables found in verses 17-20, have an allegorical meaning for Islahi. The person mentioned in the parable as lighting the fire is considered by Islahi to be Moses and the rain mentioned in the parable is the Qur'an. The parables describe the attitude of the Jews, as a group, to the revelation brought by the last Prophet. The lightning and the thunder refer to something external to the story itself. Islahi makes them apply to various aspects of the Jews' response to the new revelation that came through the Prophet. In this way, Islahi has afforded an allegorical meaning to the whole parable as well as to various elements within it (*ibid*, pp. 130-131).

The Social Context of the Believers

The first sentence of verse 174 reads as follows

Verily, as for those who suppress aught of the revelation which God has bestowed from high, and barter it away for a trifling gain – they but fill their bellies with fire.

Islahi says the verse is directed to the People of the Book (*ye ahl kitab ki taraf ishara hai*, p. 416). In support of this statement, Islahi mentions several examples where the Jews considered something lawful that was

forbidden and considered something forbidden that was actually lawful (cf. *ibid*). Islahi also gives examples that are supposed to illustrate that the Christians did similar things (cf. *ibid*). However, the context (*qarina*) provides no indication that the verse is directed to the People of the Book. Indeed, the verse and the group of verses to which it belongs could equally well apply to Muslim believers.

Islahi discusses the specific Arabic context of verse 221:

And do not marry women who ascribe divinity to aught beside God ere they attain to (true) belief; for any believing bondswoman (of God) is certainly better than a woman who ascribes divinity to aught beside God, even though she please you greatly.

Islahi says that the term referring to persons who associate a partner with God (*mushrikin aur mushrikat*) is used in the Qur'an exclusively for *Arabs* who associated partners with God and not for other groups whose ways of worship differed from the Muslims (*dusri qaumen jin mein shirk paya jata hai, khwa wo ahl kitab mein se ho ya mushaba ahl kitab mein se, wo barah-i-rast is lafs ke taht nahin hai*, *ibid*, p. 519). The conclusion should be that the prohibition against marriage extends to an Arab who associates partners with God and not to non-Arabs. However, Islahi draws a more general conclusion from the above verse according to which marriage with all those who differ from the Muslim way of faith is unlawful (cf. *ibid*). He subsequently includes examples from the history of Israel and even from the history of the Indo-Pak subcontinent to illustrate his argument forbidding marriages with non-Muslims despite his clarification that the Qur'anic terms *mushrikin aur mushrikat* were reserved specifically for the *Arabs* living at the time of revelation (cf. *ibid*, pp. 519-520). However, these terms are not reserved exclusively for the Arabs. Surah *Yusuf* uses these terms also for Muslims.

Furthermore, Islahi describes the specific context of verse 219:

They will ask thee about intoxicants and games of chance. Say: 'In both there is great evil as well as some benefit for man; but the evil which they cause is greater than the benefit which they bring.'

Islahi takes pains to point out that the phrase: "benefit for man" regarding these events and pastimes refers not to modern benefits like medical or other material benefits (*madi aur tibbi manafa*, *ibid*, p. 515) but to the customs and traditions of Arab society, which used intoxicants and games to benefit the poor (cf. *ibid*, p. 514). Islahi insists that the interpreter of the Qur'an acquaint himself with the customs of the period in which the Qur'an was

revealed. One cannot simply read this verse about intoxicants and games from the point of view of modern society (*jis ka rawaj hamari sosaiti mein hai*, ibid, p. 515) but one must know the context of Arab society (*'arb jahiliyat*). Islahi argues that the verse clarifies the attitude of Islamic *shari'ah* (*is ayat ne islami shari'at ka ye mazaj wazeh kar dia*, ibid), which forbids the use of intoxicants and games of chance (cf. ibid). In other words, Islahi suddenly makes a statement that moves beyond the specific context of Arabic society and applies to all times and places. What is the benefit of investigating Arab customs and traditions if it is already clear that the *shari'ah* has forbidden all intoxicants and games of chance? What contribution does knowledge of the historical and cultural context make towards an understanding of the verse?

The Context of Islamic Society

Islahi's devotes four pages of his commentary to verse 256 because the verse illustrates the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah:

There shall be no coercion in matters of faith. Distinct has now become the right way (from the way of) error: hence, he who rejects the powers of evil and believes in God has indeed taken hold of a support most unfailing, which shall never give way; for God is all-hearing, all-knowing.

After affirming the essential freedom of the human person to choose between right and wrong, Islahi insists that this verse protects freedom of choice. Since God has clarified what is right and what is wrong through his Prophets and Apostles, it is now up to each person to make responsible use of the power of choice. Some scholars claim that the verse justifies any kind of behaviour and dismisses all forms of punishment as un-Islamic (cf. ibid). Islahi says this would render God's law empty of all meaning (*islami shari'at hudud o ta'zirat se ek bilkul khali shari'at hai jis mein har shakhs ko sab kuch kar guzarne ki chut hasil hai*, ibid) and open the way to all kinds of corruption in society (*fazad fil ard*, ibid). This is the reason why Islam provides a complete system of punishments (*islam mein hudud o ta'zirat ka ek pura nizam hai*, ibid). If a person does not perform the obligatory prayer or fails to perform the fast, an Islamic government could punish that person without negating the meaning of "no coercion in matters of faith". Similarly, if a Muslim were guilty of causing rebellion (*islam ke khilaf baghawat*, Islamic law could punish him without going against the spirit of "no coercion in matters of faith". Furthermore, in order to remove chaos and corruption from society, Islam made *jihad* compulsory for all believers

(*islam ne ahl iman par jihad bhi wajib kiya hai*, *ibid*). This was also not contrary to the spirit of “no coercion in matters of faith”.

Once a person has embraced Islam and become a member of Islamic society (*islam ke daire mein dakhil ho janey ke ba'd*, *ibid*), he is no longer free to do as he pleases without expecting punishment. On the contrary, he would have to comply with Islamic laws and ordinances. In secular systems of society, religion is a private affair and the government punishes wrongdoing, though rebellion against God goes unpunished. But in Islamic society, religion cannot remain a private affair (*islam mein mazhab ke private zindagi se mahsus hone ka koi tasawwur nahin hai balke islami hukumat aslan khuda hi ki hukumat hoti hai*, *ibid*, p. 593) and the political institutions of Islamic society are only a means for implementing God's laws (*khuda ke ahkam aur kawanin ke ajra o nafil ka ek zariy'ah hota hai*, *ibid*). Hence, it is permissible to arrest anyone who goes against God's law (cf. *ibid*).

Islahi's argument depends for its force on the historical period (*is zamane mein*, *ibid*) when Islam was in a position of political power. In the circumstances of Islamic society, a complete system of punishment could be implemented. For example, when Islam was in power (*islami nizam mein*, *ibid*), apostasy and rebellion were considered social crimes (*irtidad . . . bahut bara jurm hai*, *ibid*).²² The reason such crimes were punished in an Islamic society was that these were crimes against the rule of God (*khuda ki hukumat aur is ke qanun ke khilaf*, *ibid*, p. 594). The punishments were not meant to compel the criminal to embrace Islam.

Similarly, Islahi discusses *jihad* in the light of conditions that prevailed for Muslims in Islamic society. He says that *jihad* is especially necessary when unbelievers try to prevent believers from practicing their faith or when they seek to destroy Islamic society (*ahl iman ko in ke din se phira jaye ya islami nizam ko barbad kiya jaye*, *ibid*). Crimes like apostasy (*irtidad*) and rebellion (*baghawat*) did represent a political challenge to the Islamic government of that period. However, more thinking needs to be done about the conditions of modern society in which Islam not longer enjoys a position of power.²³

²² The same conditions applied in the time of Pharaoh. When the feats that Moses accomplished in Pharaoh's court were so impressive that many of his sorcerers professed their belief in the one God, Pharaoh considered their profession of faith a crime against the State and crucified them because this was the punishment meted out to criminals who rebelled against the State. Cf. verses 123-127 in Surah *Al-A'raf*.

²³ A recent book by Muhammad Yasin Mazhar Siddiqi, *The Prophet Muhammad. A Role Model for Muslim Minorities*, The Islamic Foundation, Leicestershire, 2006, is an attempt in this direction.

Finally, Islahi recalls verse 143:

And thus have We willed you to be a community of the middle way, so that (with your lives) you might bear witness to the truth before all mankind, and that the Apostle might bear witness to it before you."

Comparing this verse with that from *Surah An Nisa*, he says the word "witness" (which occurs in each of them) describes the new responsibility given to the Muslim community for the sake of all mankind (*zimmadari . . . dunya ke samne*, *ibid*, p. 406). There is a similar idea in verse 10 of *Surah Al Imran*: "You are indeed the best community". These verses are an expression of the theme (*'umud*) of the *Surah* concerning the deposition of the Jews and the ascendancy of the Muslim community.

The Former Scriptures

Most of Islahi's references to the former Scriptures in *Surah Al Baqarah* consist of references to the Torah. When the Torah confirms the message of the Qur'an, Islahi simply quotes the Torah without further comment. For example, he quotes a passage from Exodus (*cf. ibid*, p. 218) and from Numbers (*cf. ibid*, pp. 222-223) and from Deuteronomy (*cf. ibid*, p. 246). In all these cases, he considers the words of the Torah to be self evident in the light of the Qur'an and, therefore, to require no further clarification. Sometimes, the Torah even provides useful details where the Qur'an has given only a very brief account. However, at other times the Qur'an corrects the Torah by providing a different account of the same incident.

While Islahi is very careful to discuss the language, context and other related issues of each Qur'anic verse or passage, he does not manifest a similar readiness to investigate the context and other related issues with regard to the Torah. Whereas Islahi stresses the importance of knowing the purpose of any passage in the Qur'an (*kitab allah ka asal maqsud*, *ibid*. p. 243), he does not find it important to understand the purpose of a passage from the former Scriptures in order to understand its meaning correctly. For example, Islahi shows no hesitation in his application of the parable of the ten foolish virgins from Matthew's Gospel to the Jews (*cf. ibid*, p. 270). However, Islahi does not provide a convincing argument as to why the parable should be restricted in this way. The parable could be directed to anyone whose lack of awareness is symbolized by those foolish virgins. It need not be directed specifically to the Jews, as Islahi maintains.

Similarly, Islahi simply quotes the Genesis account of the Prophet Abraham without giving any further analysis of the context of this passage. Islahi interprets the passage according to the commonly accepted view regarding two lines of descent, that of Isaac and of Ishmael (*allah ta'ala ne hazrat ishaq aur hazrat isma'il dono ki nasl se 'azim qaumen paida ki*, ibid. p. 326). He does the same with Exodus, quoting two passages in order to prove a simple point about the direction for prayer (*is tafsil se wazeh hua ke jis tarah hamari namazon aur qurbanion ka qibla khana ka'bah hai isi tarah ibtida hi se hazrat ibrahim . . . ka qibla bhi khana ka'bah hi ko qarar dene ka faislah hua*, ibid. p. 328). Islahi simply uses these passages from the Torah to support his own preconceived ideas. Moreover, by omitting a proper examination of the context, Islahi fails to follow his own discipline with regard to the interpretation of the Qur'an.

In verses 243-253 of the Surah, Islahi finds certain differences between the Qur'anic and the Biblical accounts. Instead of accepting each narrative as presenting a different perspective or dimension of the historical events, Islahi finds the two narratives conflicting and says that the Torah is wrong (*quran ka bayan sahih aur taurat ka bayan ghalat hai*, ibid. p. 573).²⁴ Islahi finds two reasons why the account found in the Qur'an should be preferred to that found in the Torah. The first reason concerns the credibility of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) over the traditions handed down in the former Scriptures for which there are no clear means of verification (*qadim asmani sahifon ki jin sargusashton ke janane ka tumhare pas koi zariy'ah nahin*, ibid.). This provides Islahi with the justification for his own view that the Qur'an should correct the Torah in several important ways (*haq ye hai jo quran mein bayan ho raha hai na ke wo jo taurat mein bayan hua hai*, ibid. p. 574). Islahi must find a way to reconcile his position of superiority regarding the Torah with his conviction that all revelation comes from God (*jis tarah hamare liye tamam rasulon par iman lana zaruri hai isi tarah tamam asmani kitabon par iman lana bhi zaruri hai*, ibid, p. 648). How can a person believe in the former Scriptures if these Scriptures cannot be verified?

²⁴ Islahi has a similar assessment of the Torah in his discussion of verse 27 of Surah *Al Maidah*. The verse relates the narrative of the two sons of Adam, Cain and Abel, from the Book of Genesis. On the basis of the account in the Qur'an, Islahi says the account in the Torah (*kitab paidaish, bab 4, ayat 1-12*) is lacking in several ways (*taurat mein ye musibat hai ke na to waqe'at thik thik bayan hue hain aur na in se wo hikmat o nasihat hi wazeh hoti hai jo wazeh honi chahiye*, vol. 2, p. 496).

Next, Islahi appeals to “reason and logic”, which he says will support the view that the Qur’an presents the correct version of these events (*‘aql aur mantaq ki rau se bhi wohi bat sahih ma’lum hoti hai jo quran mein bayan hui hai*, *ibid.*) However, the “reason and logic” referred to by Islahi is a reflection of his own particular way of understanding these events. He proceeds to quote the Book of Samuel in support of his view that the Israelites were totally corrupt and disorganized at this period of their history (*taurat se saf ma’lum hota hai ke . . . is zamane mein bani israil ‘itiqadi o ‘amli ‘itibar se bhi bilkul tabah hal they aur siyasi ‘itibar se bhi sakht paragandagi aur intashar mein mubtala they*, *ibid.*).

Clearly, Islahi’s purpose is to portray the Israelites in a poor light and thereby to confirm the theme (*‘umud*) of the Surah which, immediately after quoting the Book of Samuel, he says is based on the context of the Qur’an (*quran ne yahi kaha hai aur ye bat har ‘itibar se qarin ‘aql o qiyas ma’lum hoti hai*, *ibid.* p. 576). Islahi says that the Torah cannot distinguish the true from the false (*is ke andar haq o batil ka imtiyaz na mumkin hai. ye quran ka ihsan hai ke us ne ba’z waq’e’at ke sahih pahlu numayan kiye*, *ibid.*). However, Islahi had said earlier that the word *furqan* is used in the Qur’an for both the Qur’an and the Torah (*furqan ke ma’ni hain haq o batil ke darmiyan farq karne wali chiz yahan dau bayan aur tafsir ke liye hai . . . quran majid mein quran aur taurat donon ke liye furqan ki ta’bir ist’emal hui hai*, *ibid.*, pp. 212-213).

Furthermore, Islahi refers to the Book of Samuel to illustrate the resemblance between the wars of the Israelites and the battle of *Badr*. He points out that there is a remarkable similarity between the way the battle lines were drawn up according to chapter 17 of the first Book of Samuel and the way the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) prepared his army for the battle of *Badr* (*ye bilkul jang-i-badr ki taswir hai*, *ibid.*, p. 576). Although Islahi’s observation may well be correct, he understands the former Scriptures exclusively from the Qur’anic point of view and there is no evidence at all that he has made an exegetical study of the narrative contained in the Book of Samuel.

Moreover, the struggle between David and Goliath is referred to both in the Qur’an and in the Book of Samuel. Islahi refers to the specific purpose of the narrative in the Qur’an (*maqsud imtehan ka zikr hai*, *ibid.* p. 577) but does not take note of the specific purpose of the narrative in the Book of Samuel. Instead of placing the narrative within the total context of the

revealed Scripture (as Islahi would do for any passage taken from the Qur'an), Islahi limits himself to a few verses from the Book of Samuel that agree with verses in the Qur'an. For example, the last part of verse 249 in Surah *Al Baqarah* says:

How often has a small host overcome a great host by God's leave!
For God is with those who are patient in adversity.

Islahi finds a similar verse in 1 Samuel, chapter 14, verse 6:

Perhaps Yahweh will do something for us, for nothing can prevent
Yahweh from giving us victory, whether there are many or few of
them.

Such a verse-by-verse comparison prevents Islahi from understanding the narrative in the Book of Samuel according to its own context and purpose. As a result, he rejects the Torah's version as totally confused and without purpose (*bilkul maskh aur be maqsud*, *ibid*, p. 579). Islahi concludes his discussion with the characteristic phrase that whoever is sensitive to the true nature of the Qur'an will agree that only the Qur'anic account of the narrative demonstrates clarity of purpose, fruitfulness and wisdom (*quran ka bayan har pahlu se ba maqsud, natijah khez aur pur hikmat hai*, *ibid.*).

In contrast to these negative remarks about the Torah, Islahi finds important similarities between the narrative of David and Goliath in the Qur'an and in the Torah (cf. *ibid.* p. 580). In verse 251 of the Qur'an, defeat and victory both occur "by God's leave" and this shows that the fundamental question is not about numbers or resources but concerns one's relationship with God (*asl ta'lluq qillat o kasrat aur wasail o tadabir se nahin balke allah ta'ala se hai*, *ibid.* p. 581). According to Islahi, a similar truth is presented in the Book of Samuel (1 Samuel, 17. 46-47) where David proclaims that he will kill the Philistine:

So that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all
this assembly may know that it is not by sword or by spear that
Yahweh gives the victory, for Yahweh is lord of the battle and he will
deliver you into our power.

Islahi quotes this passage from the Torah because it expresses what the Qur'an means with the words "by God's leave".

In his subsequent discussion of verse 259 of the Surah, Islahi again has recourse to the former Scriptures. He finds a parallel for the Qur'anic parable (*misal*) in the Prophet Ezekiel's experience of the dry bones (cf. Ezekiel 37. 11-14). In this case, the Torah provides more detail than the Qur'an and there is no contradiction between the two accounts (*ye farq tasad*

ki nauiyat ka nahin balke ajmal o tafsil ki nauiyat ka hai, ibid, 602). Islahi states that it is the basic *purpose* of the two Scriptures that unites them despite differences in detail or style. Though the two narratives are based on different traditions, they have only one basic purpose (*ek hi maqsud ki do riwayat mein paya jata hai jis ko tanaqaz par nahin balke ajmal o tafsil par mahmul kiya jata hai*, ibid). The purpose of Prophet Ezekiel is to awaken the hope of the Israelites for a new life (*in ka khas maqsud hani israil ko az sar-i-nau zinda karna tha*, ibid, p. 604) and verse 259 of the Surah has a similar purpose with regard to the believers. Although the purpose of these two narratives may be the same, however, one cannot presume that the purpose of all narratives in these two Scriptures will be the same.²⁵

The Theme of the Surah

In his introductions to some of the earlier groups of verses, Islahi says that the Qur'an presents detailed accounts of how the Jews misbehaved and rejected God's covenant. He states that the purpose of such detailed accounts in the Qur'an is to explain why the Jews' position of pre-eminence was transferred to the community of Muslims.

The first 39 verses of the Surah function as a preface for what follows (*tumhid o muqadamah*, ibid, p. 174). Although these introductory verses are addressed to the Prophet, there are many reasons (*isharat o kinayat*, ibid) to conclude that the verses concern the Jews (*wo tamam tar yahud hi se muta'lluq*, ibid). The verses that come next are addressed directly to the Jews. Firstly, they are reminded of the responsibilities that the Torah and the explicit summons of the last Prophet have placed upon them. Next, a detailed account is given of their misdeeds on account of which the mandate that had been entrusted to them was taken away from them and given to others to be their guiding law (*tafsil ke sath in ke wo juraim bayan hui hain jin ke sabab se wo is bat ke mustahq hain ke allah ta'ala in ko mansub-i-imamat se ma'zul kar ke dusron ko apni hidayat o shari'at saunpe*, ibid). Islahi says that this topic makes up about half of the Surah (cf. ibid). After

²⁵ As Saeed says: "At times, the Qur'an repeats the same event at different places with different wording. For instance, the story of Noah recurs with varying lengths in Q. 7:59-64, 9:70, 11:25-48, 14:9, 22:42, 25:37, 26:105-122, 38:12, 40:5, 31, 50:12, 51:46, 53:52 and 54:9-17. These texts in different parts of the Qur'an are neither contradictory nor repetitive. The verses place emphasis on different aspects of the event depending on its particular context in the Qur'an, largely as a lesson to the community of the Prophet Muhammad." Saeed (2006), p. 95. In a similar way, the Bible and the Qur'an relate the same event in different ways according to their different contexts. It cannot be said that these two Scriptures contradict each other.

describing God's invitation to the Jews, the Surah provides a comprehensive account of the reasons why the Jews were deposed from their pre-eminent position (*ma'zuli ke waju ki puri tafsil*, *ibid*). This overview of the Surah presents the basis for Islahi's formulation of the theme ('*umud*) as the revelation of Islamic law (*shari'ah*).

In the verse-by-verse examination of the verses that follows, Islahi makes no direct reference to the deposition of the Jews. However, Islahi understands the many verses dealing with the Jews' infidelity and the subsequent guidance that God bestowed through the Qur'an in the light of verse 6 of Surah *Al Fatihah* (*is haqiqat ki raushni mein*, *ibid*, p. 75). Surah *Al Baqarah* is a response to the prayer in Surah *Al Fatihah*: *ihdina sirat almustaqim* (*isi du'a ke jawab mein ye surah baqarah quran aur nabi salla allahu alayhi wa sallam par iman lane ki da'wat de rahi hai*, *ibid*). The infidelity and eventual deposition of the Jews is, therefore, a significant link in the process that brought the revelation of the Qur'an. Islahi highlights the deposition of the Jews in order to prepare the way for the Islamic law (*shari'ah*), which is the theme ('*umud*) of Surah *Al Baqarah*.

The subsequent group of verses (verses 63-82) remind the Israelites of the many ways in which they have broken their covenant with God and explain why the special mandate entrusted to them by God should now be taken away from them and transferred to a new community who would exercise it with greater responsibility (*in ko imamat ke mansub se ma'zul kare aur in ki jaga ek dusre ummat ko utae jo is ki shari'at ko az sar-i-nau tazah surat mein dunya ke samne pesh kare*, *ibid*, p. 237). Islahi describes the fraud, deceit and infidelity of the Jews in great detail in order to illustrate the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah and to support his conclusion that the special mandate given to the Jews was transferred to the Muslim community.

According to Islahi, verse 107 is a direct reference to the deposition of the Jews and to the establishment of the new community of believers in their place:

Dost thou not know that God's is the dominion over the heavens and the earth, and that besides God you have none to protect you or bring you succour?

The context of this verse is the political situation arising out of the preceding verse about abrogation. Islahi says that the fundamental reason why the Jews were raising the question of abrogation and spreading discontent

among the ordinary people was not that they resisted the abrogation of the Torah but that the mandate entrusted to them by God was being taken away from them and was being entrusted to a new community (*yahud ki mansub imamat se ma'zuli aur in ki jaga ek dusri ummat ke nasab o taqarar ka paiyam bhi muzamar hai*, *ibid*, p. 297). The Jews used the issue of abrogation as a way of dealing with their sense of loss and anger at the ascendancy of the Muslims (*wo naskh ke sawal ko ek pardah ke taur par iste'mal kar rahe they*, *ibid*). The Qur'an dismisses the Jews' dissatisfaction at the rise of the Muslim community by reminding them, in verse 107, that God has dominion over the heavens and the earth and that everything comes under his authority (*cf. ibid*).

From the word "dominion" in the above verse, Islahi draws the conclusion that God, who has full dominion and authority over all things, decided to divest the Jews of their special mandate to be the custodians of *din* and to entrust a new community of Muslims with this mandate. Islahi says that verses 142-162 announce the appearance of a new community that will replace the one that was deposed (*ab goya in ko ma'zuli kar ke ek nayi ummat ke qayam ka e'lan kiya ja raha hai. ye ummat ummat-i-wasat hai*, *ibid*, p. 355). This new community will follow the true *din* (*din-i-haq*, *ibid*) and religion of Abraham (*is ki millet, millet ibrahim*, *ibid*) and accept the Inviolable House of Worship as its new direction for prayer (*is ka qibla, qibla ibrahimi bait allah alharam hai*, *ibid*). It will be the special task of this new community to act as a witness to the original *din* of God (*allah ke asli din ki gawahi*, *ibid*).

According to Islahi, verse 143 describes the situation of the Jews and the new community of Muslims even more clearly:

And thus have We willed you to be a community of the middle way, so that (with your lives) you might bear witness to the truth before all mankind, and that the Apostle might bear witness to it before you.

The Muslim community was named the "community of the middle way" because this community was committed to putting into practice the *din* that God had given to the world by means of his Prophets and Apostles (*ye ummat thik thik din ki is bich shahirah par qaim hai*, *ibid*, p. 363) since this was, from the beginning, the authentic path (*jo ibtida se hidayat ki asli shahirah hai*, *ibid*). The Jews and the Christians had forfeited this special mandate and were now excluded from exercising the special task of guidance in the world. Islahi says that the same meaning is brought out clearly in verse 159:

Behold, as for those who suppress aught of the evidence of the truth and of the guidance which We have bestowed from on high, after We have made it clear unto mankind through the divine writ – these it is whom God will reject, and whom all who can judge will reject.

The context makes it clear (*mauqa' kalam dalil hai*, ibid, p. 388) that the verse points to the evidence available in the Torah about the coming of the Last Prophet (*wo nishaniyan murad hain jo taurat mein . . . yahud ko akhri paighambar ke bab mein rahnumai hasil ho sake*, ibid). Instead of taking note of this evidence, however, the Jews tried to hide it (cf. ibid).

The first part of the Surah ends with verse 162. Islahi says that the whole of the first part is concerned with the deposition of the Jews from their pre-eminent position (*yahud mansub-i-imamat se ma'zul huey*, ibid, p. 389) and the appearance of a new community with its own characteristics (*ek nayi ummat apni tamam khususiyat ke sath numayan hui*, ibid). The second part of the Surah begins from verse 163 and describes how this new community appropriated the new law (*is nayi ummat ke liye az sar-i-nau shari'at-i-ilahi ki tajdid ki ja rahi hai*, ibid) according to the circumstances and demands of the period (*surah ke zamanah nazul ke halat mutaqazi they*, ibid, pp. 389-390). The last two verses of the Surah (verses 285-286) repeatedly refer to the Muslim believers' willingness to hear and obey the law of God (cf. ibid, pp. 648-652). Through the prayer contained in these last verses, the new community of Muslim believers expresses its readiness to take up the responsibilities that come with obedience to this law (*ahl-i-iman ke liye . . . ek 'azim shari'at ki zimmadariyan dali ja rahi hain*, ibid, p. 650). Islahi has demonstrated that the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah is the *shari'ah* implemented by the Muslim community.

Conclusions

My first remarks concern the introduction that Islahi gives to the Surah.

1. Five or six Surahs were revealed before Surah *Al Fatihah* and about eighty Surahs were revealed after it. Hence, it is historically incorrect to say, as Islahi does, that Surah *Al Baqarah* is linked to Surah *Al Fatihah* in the way that an answer to a prayer is linked to the prayer itself.
2. Although Islahi says that the basic topic of Surah *Al Baqarah* is the call to faith, one could say this about many of the other Surahs as well.
3. Surah *Al Baqarah* is not addressed primarily to the Jews. For example, verse 8 is addressed to the hypocrites and verse 40 mentions “*bani israil*”, a term that includes Jews, Christians and the followers of other Prophets as well. Verse 104 is addressed to the Muslims and many topics raised in this Surah concern the Muslims – for example: *qibla*, *haj*, *ramzan*, *zadaqat*, *jihad*, *nikah* and fasting.
4. Islahi accuses the Jews of bringing corruption among the Muslims but the Muslims themselves caused some of this corruption. He fails to distinguish the virtuous Jews from the non-virtuous ones, as the Qur’an explicitly does.

Islahi indicates that *din* has gradually developed towards perfection throughout history (*takmil-i-din*, ibid, p. 377) but he seems to give greater emphasis to the unchangeable and permanent quality of the “original *din*” (*allah ke asli din*, ibid, p. 355). However, if *din* has existed within history since the time of Abraham, the changing circumstances of history would surely have had some influence on its expression. I find that Islahi does not give due consideration to the changing manifestations of *din* in history.

Islahi stresses that *din* and *islam* are attributes that are bestowed by God on the basis of faith and good works and not on the basis of membership of a group or family. Islahi contradicts himself by elevating the Muslim community above all others and concluding that God gave the true *din* only to the Muslim community in Medina. Islahi arrives at this exclusivist claim by failing to make a distinction between *din* and the particular manifestation of *din* in history that came to be known as Islam.

Islahi says that the *shari'ah* achieved its perfect expression in the Muslim community (*ab is ummat ko jo shari'ah mili hai wo khuda ki asl hidayat ko is ki akhri aur mukamal shakl mein pesh karti hai*, *ibid*, p. 348). Islahi has highlighted the Islamic government in Medina, which had the authority to interpret and to enforce Islamic punishments, as the perfect expression of *din* and of the *shari'ah*. He considers the Islamic society in Medina as the enduring model for the expression of Islam for all times. By restricting the meaning of Islam to a particular situation in the past, Islahi undermines the universal value of the Qur'an.

Islahi compares verse 54 of this Surah (about repentance for worshipping the calf) with the narrative in the Book of Exodus (chapter 32, verses 25-30) without appreciating the specific purpose that this passage has in the Book of Exodus. Nor is he aware of the meaning the passage may receive from its position in the Bible as a whole. Moreover, since the Book of Exodus originated in a different historical period from that of the Qur'an, it cannot be used to illustrate verse 54 of Surah *Al Baqarah* without a profound exegetical analysis. Furthermore, Islahi's literal interpretation of both the narrative in the Book of Exodus and of verse 54 of Surah *Al Baqarah* seems to encourage the use of similar punishments for criminals today.²⁶

It is Islahi's custom to focus on questions of language, purpose and context with regard to a passage from the Qur'an. However, he does not show the same urgency with regard to passages from the Bible despite the fact that a correct approach to the Bible raises similar issues of language, purpose and context. For example, Islahi's verse-by-verse comparison of verses from Surah *Al Baqarah* with the Book of Samuel prevents him from understanding the narrative in the Book of Samuel according to its own context and purpose. For similar reasons, he incorrectly applies the parable of the ten foolish virgins from Matthew's Gospel to the Jews (*cf. ibid*, p. 270).

²⁶ An Indian Biblical scholar describes an approach to the Bible resembling that of Islahi: "Ever since the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries, which ushered in the modern era, it was historical criticism that has been the dominant method of biblical exegesis. Side by side with this scientific method there has been also what is known as the fundamentalist approach to the interpretation of the Bible whereby a too literal sense of the Bible was defended; and it was seen as a safeguard against the liberal interpretation of the Bible. Both these approaches subscribe to an objectivist, one dimensional hermeneutics, which assumes that the text of the Bible has only one true meaning, wholly independent of the cultural conditioning of the reader and the interpreter." Pathrapankal (2002), p. 167.

Islahi's attitude to the former Scriptures remains ambiguous. He accepts the former Scriptures (*tamam asmani kitabon par iman lana bhi zaruri hai*, ibid, p. 648) but also says the Torah is wrong (*taurat ka bayan ghalat hai*, ibid, p. 573) and that it is without purpose (*bilkul maskh aur bemaqsud*, ibid, p. 579). Islahi does not give any evidence of having made a serious exegetical study of the former Scriptures and makes selective use of the former Scriptures in order to illustrate and to confirm his own formulation of the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah. In other words, he reads the former Scriptures purely from the point of view of his understanding of the Qur'an. This is to limit the meaning of the former Scriptures to conform to his own particular viewpoint.

Furthermore, Islahi is unclear about the need to know the context and background of the verses of the Surah itself. For instance, he stresses the Arabic context (*'arb jahiliyat*, ibid, p. 515) as the background for verse 219, which speaks about intoxicants and games of chance. Islahi says that this verse cannot be understood from the point of view of modern society but must be seen in the light of its own social context. Having said this, however, Islahi moves beyond the specific cultural and social context of Arabic society to draw a conclusion about intoxicants and games of chance that applies in every context and in every period of history. There are several examples in *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* where Islahi moves directly from the specific context to draw a universal conclusion. Why is Islahi so concerned to understand the verse in the limited context of Arabic society if the meaning of the verse is universal? Islahi unnecessarily restricts the meaning of a verse to particular addressees in the past.

Finally, in order to establish the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah, Islahi takes a political approach to verse 107, which refers to God's "dominion over the heavens and the earth". Islahi says that the verse is a response to the Jews' dissatisfaction with the ascendancy of the Muslim community (cf. ibid, p. 297) and is a direct reference to the deposition of the Jews and to the establishment of the new community of Muslims in their place. He highlights the social, political and religious weaknesses of the Jewish community in order to underline the need for a reform in society brought about by the *shari'ah*. In other words, Islahi interprets verse 107 to suit his own purposes, which is to develop an argument for the thematic coherence of the Surah in terms of the *shari'ah*.

Surah Al 'Imran

Introduction

1. The Theme of the Surah and its Relation with the Previous Surah

The following five reasons explain the intimate connection between Surah Al 'Imran and Surah Al Baqarah:²⁷

1. They both share the same subject matter concerning the proofs for Prophethood (*risalat ka isbat*, ibid).
2. Both Surahs provide a detailed exposition of *din*.
3. They both share the same Qur'anic name: *alif, lam, mim*.
4. Each Surah is like a large, though separate, branch sprouting from a single trunk. The Prophet referred to the first one as the sun and to the second as the moon.
5. The two Surahs form a pair (*donon mein zaujen ki si nisbat hai*, ibid). The first Surah is brief whereas the second Surah is more detailed. The second Surah fills in what the first Surah left out. Together they form a complete and perfect whole.

2. The Differences between the two Surahs

Besides the aspects they share in common, each Surah has special characteristics by which one can be distinguished from the other. Surah Al Baqarah was revealed at the time when the People of the Book considered Islam to be a genuine religion (*islam ek sachā din hai*, ibid). Subsequently, they began to oppose Islam because of their stubbornness and jealousy (*hasad aur zid ke ba'is*, ibid). Different people presented different objections. Some said that prophecy could arise only from the house of Israel. Others said that the Torah was sufficient as guidance and there was no need for further revelation. Still others presented Judaism and Christianity as a united front and denied there could be any further revelation outside these two religions. Another group said that the Muslims could not claim a monopoly on faith. Surah Al 'Imran was revealed in this context (*in halat mein ye surah utri*, ibid, p. 10). The Surah responds to all the objections raised by the Jews and shows how the Last Prophet is mentioned in their own Scriptures. Finally, the Surah offers the guidance

²⁷ All the five points mentioned here are mentioned in vol. 2, p. 9.

provided by the true religion that was perfected by the Last Prophet (*din haq ki jo tajdid o takmil hui thiy is ki taraf rahnumai ki gayi*, ibid).

The Surah was revealed at a time when Islam had reached such a level of acceptance that it was no longer possible for the People of the Book to oppose it openly (*is ki e'laniyah mukhalafat karna mumkin nahin raha*, ibid). In this situation, the People of the Book were divided into two groups. The first group accepted Islam but only superficially. The second group did not accept Islam but tried to reach a compromise solution. According to these people, since each religion has its own truth (*in ka apna din haq hai*, ibid), the Muslims should leave Judaism and Christianity to them and they would leave Islam to the Muslims (*musalman ham ko hamari yahudiyat o nasraniyat par chaur den aur ham musalmanon ko in ke islam par*, ibid). In this way, each religion could live side by side in the same country (*ek hi mulk mein*, ibid) according to its own religion.²⁸ Islahi describes both these groups as opportunistic (*maslahat parasti par mubni thiy*, ibid, p. 11).

The battle of *Uhud* demonstrated how these groups changed their way of thinking to suit themselves and eventually came to oppose Islam (*islam aur musalmanon ki mukhalafat ki rah par chal parey*, ibid). Just as they themselves were divided into sects, they tried to destroy Islam by breaking up their unity (cf. ibid). In this environment, it was important that people should not be confused by various religions but know that the true religion was Islam (*kai din nahin mile hain balke ek hi din mila hai jis ka nam islam hai*, ibid). It should not be acceptable to pick and choose any part of Islam that one found suitable but one should have to accept or to reject the whole of Islam. If one accepted Islam, one had to be faithful in bad times as well as in good times. Just as the battle of *Badr* was a struggle between truth and falsity, so the battle of *Uhud* became a means by which those of weak faith were distinguished from those who were strong.

The present Surah was revealed in this context. It describes the waywardness and shortcomings of the People of the Book, of the hypocrites and of weak Muslims (*kamzaur qism ke musalmanon ki taraf se hua tha*, ibid, p. 12). As Surah *Al Baqarah* revolves around the battle of *Badr*, so the present Surah revolves around the battle of *Uhud*.²⁹ Moreover, as Surah *Al*

²⁸ According to Islahi, this is precisely the viewpoint of those in the modern world who support the concept of "unity of religions" (*wahdat adyan*, ibid, footnote).

²⁹ Even though Islahi says that Surah *Al Baqarah* revolves around the battle of *Badr*, I find no mention at all of the battle of *Badr* in Surah *Al Baqarah*.

Baqarah deals with faith, so the present Surah deals with Islam. In other words, as the previous Surah is an invitation to accept the Last Prophet, the present Surah is an invitation to enter the Islamic State and to accept the sovereignty of God (*islami nizam aur allah ki hukumat mein dakhil honey ki da'wat hai*, *ibid*). As far as the theme ('*umud*) of the two Surahs is concerned, the previous Surah highlights the aspect of faith whereas the present Surah brings out the aspect of Islam. In short, faith leads to Islam (*iman ka lazmi sumra islam hai*, *ibid*).

A second point that distinguishes the two Surahs from each other is the fact that while Surah *Al Baqarah* is addressed mainly to the Jews (*ziyadatar khitab yahud se hai*, *ibid*), the present Surah is addressed directly to the Christians. The Surah opens with verses that are directed to both the Jews and the Christians but gradually the Surah confronts the Christians (*tadriji taur par nisara ki tardid mein numayan hota gaya hai*, *ibid*, p. 13).

A third distinctive point is that Surah *Al Baqarah* drew on the evidence of nature (*fitrat*, *ibid*) so as to make an appeal both to the unbelievers as well as to the People of the Book (*donon par yaksan hujjat ho sakti hai*, *ibid*). In contrast, the present Surah argues from divine attributes (*ziyadatar istadlal sifat ilahi ya aise muslimat se hai*, *ibid*) that are more especially related to the People of the Book.

A fourth mark of difference is that, although God reproaches the People of the Book in both Surahs, the style in which this is done differs in each Surah. In Surah *Al Baqarah*, the reproach is made directly to those concerned but in the present Surah, God directs the Prophet to reproach the Christians. The implication is that the Christians cannot be addressed directly because the Prophet has already presented a complete and perfect message (*hujjat tamam ho janey ke ba'd ye log laiq khitab nahin hai*, *ibid*).

3. The Order in which the Surahs Appear

Islahi says that the above considerations explain why the two Surahs appear in the order in which they come in the Qur'an (*yahi tartib honi chahie thiy jo hai*, *ibid*). Since the Jews came before the Christians, it is necessary to provide them with complete evidence first (*yahud par hujjat tamam ki jaye*, *ibid*). The Qur'an begins by using arguments based on nature (*quran ne pahle is ko iste'mal kiya*, *ibid*) because such arguments are broader in scope than those based on the divine attributes. It is also appropriate that the

narrative concerning the Prophet Abraham precede that of the Prophet Moses – hence the order in which these narratives appear in the two Surahs

narrative concerning the Prophet Abraham precede that of the Prophet Moses – hence the order in which these narratives appear in the two Surahs (cf. *ibid*).

Islahi disagrees with those who say the order in which the Surahs appear is based on their length. In fact, the order depends on their meaning (*is ka ta'lluq ma'ni o matalib se hai*, *ibid*). The order in which the Surahs in the Qur'an appear is based on the wisdom contained in their meaning (*hikmat jis tartib ki muqtazi hui hai wo tartib quran mein ikhtiyar farmai gayi hai*, *ibid*).

4. The Coherence of the Surah

The Surah naturally divides into two halves. The first half consists of the obedience that should be given to God and the waywardness of the Christians. The second half informs the Muslims of the devious ways in which the Christians were trying to lure them away from the right path (*in ko rah-i-haq se hatane ke liye*, *ibid*, p. 14). Besides, the Muslims are encouraged to hold fast to their faith, to become involved in the struggle (*jihad karne*, *ibid*) and to be certain of receiving assistance in times of trial. This is the way Muslims become the followers of Islam (*islam ki pairwi ka sahih haq ada kar sakenge*, *ibid*).

The first half of the Surah thus forms the preface (*nisf awwal ki haisiyat tamhid ki hai*, *ibid*) and the second half presents the main purpose of the Surah (*nisf sani ki haisiyat maqsud ki*, *ibid*). If the Surah is read in this light (*is roshni mein*, *ibid*), its inter-connectedness will be obvious (*ayat ka bahimi nazm samajhne mein bari asani hogi*, *ibid*) and the preface will achieve its purpose (*tamhid se asli maqsud yahi hai*, *ibid*). Further investigation into the Surah according to the way its verses are grouped into clusters of verses will throw light on their correct interpretation (*ajaza ko bhi alag alag majmu'on ki shakl mein le kar in ki tafsir karenge*, *ibid*).

The Theme of the Surah

In his introductory remarks, Islahi presented the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah by saying that the call to faith (made in Surah *Al Baqarah*) leads to a call to Islam in Surah *Al 'Imran*. Islahi puts it quite clearly when he says that the theme ('*umud*) of this Surah is Islam (*is surah ka 'umud islam hai*, *ibid*, p. 100). Islahi understands Surah *Al 'Imran* as an invitation to enter Islamic society (*islami nizam*, *ibid*, p. 12) and to establish the sovereignty of God (*allah ki hukumat*, *ibid*). Verse 103 is an illustration of this theme ('*umud*) since it presents the “developed meaning” of the phrase “bond with God” (*apne isi ma'ni se taraqi kar ke*, *ibid*, p. 153):

And hold fast, all together, unto the bond with God, and do not draw apart from one another. And remember the blessings which God has bestowed upon you; how, when you were enemies, He brought your hearts together, so that through His blessing you became brethren; and (how, when) you were on the brink of a fiery abyss, He saved you from it.

Islahi translates the Arabic phrase: *habl ilahi* as “ the rope of God” (*aur allah ke rassi ko sab mil kar mazbuti se pakro*, *ibid*, p.150) and says that the “developed meaning” of this phrase allows us to understand it according to the sense of “relationship” or “connection” between people. Developed even further, the word comes to mean covenant or agreement between people or nations. In this particular verse, Islahi says the word refers to the Qur'an itself because the Qur'an binds us with one another and with God as in a covenant (*habl se murad quran hai is liye ke yahi hamari rab aur hamari darmiyan ek ahd o misaq hai*, *ibid*). The phrase cannot have a physical understanding (*zahiri mafhum*, *ibid*) since the link between mankind and God can be established only by taking hold of the Book (*goya yahi chize hai jo bandon ko khuda se jorti hai. jis ne is ko tham liya, goya khuda ko tham liya*, *ibid*). Moreover, Islahi urges the Muslim community never to let go of their bond with God in order to avoid the disorder that came to exist among the Jews and Christians because they neglected to hold onto their covenant with God (*isi tarah paragandah ho jayenge jis tarah yahud o nisara paragandah ho gaye*, *ibid*).

Islahi develops the meaning of verse 103 in the direction of the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah, which is the development of Islamic society based on the Qur'an. He says that the verse refers to the organization that should exist among Muslims (*musalmanon ki shirazah bandi*, *ibid*, p. 154). Furthermore, it is clear from verses 104-105 that power and force should be used to establish the Muslim society because preaching alone will not achieve it (*ikhtiyar aur quwwat se is ko nafiz karna hai jo baghair is ke mumkin nahin ke ye groh ummat ki taraf se siyasi iqtidar o ikhtiyar ka hamil ho*, *ibid*, p. 155). This brings a political dimension to the establishment of Islam and to the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah. However, Islahi seems to be limiting his discussion to the period of the Rightly Guided Caliphs (*khilafat rashidah ke daur mein*, *ibid*).

Furthermore, verse 124 says:

(And remember) when thou didst say unto the believers: "Is it not enough for you (to know) that your Sustainer will aid you with three thousand angels sent down (from on high)?"

Islahi says that it was probably during the battle of *Uhud* that God fulfilled this promise (*jang-i-uhud ke waqiy'ah shahid hain ke allah ta'ala ne apne is wa'de ko pura farmaya*, *ibid*, 172). The weakness of some of the believers resulted in their victory turning into failure (*sabr o taqwa ki kamzauri ke sahab se shikast mein tabdili ho gayi*, *ibid*). Interpreted figuratively, the reference to "three thousand angels" at *Uhud* and "one thousand angels" at *Badr* (cf. verses 9-10 in Surah *Al Anfal*) could be signs of God's desire to strengthen the believers' hearts through spiritual forces coming from God.³⁰ However, Islahi prefers the physical or literal meaning of these events because it illustrates the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah regarding the development of a new community, an Islamic society and government.

Islahi recognizes the symbolic nature of events like the battle of *Badr* and *Uhud*, saying that they demonstrate characteristics of the allegorical (*mutashaba*, *ibid*, p. 30), a word used to describe all kinds of language that transcend the powers of reason and whose meaning the Qur'an communicates by way of parables and similarities (*tamsili o tashbihi rang*

³⁰ Muhammad Asad notes that the reference to great numbers of angels "would seem to indicate the unlimited nature of God's aid to those who are 'patient in adversity and conscious of Him'. It is reasonable to assume that the Prophet thus exhorted his followers immediately before the battle of *Uhud*." Asad (1980), p. 87, note 93. Asad thus provides a more general interpretation of this event.

mein quran ne batai hai, ibid. p. 25). Consequently, just as the battle of *Badr* represents the judgment between truth and falsehood, the battle of *Uhud* has the nature of one of the allegorical verses of the Qur'an because it demonstrated the victory of truth over falsehood (*jis tarah ghazwa badr haq o batil ke darmiyan ek yaumi furqan tha . . . isi tarah ghazwa uhud ki haisiyat ek ayat mutashaba ki hai*, ibid. p. 30). In other words, God made the battle of *Badr* into a symbolic message for the three groups opposing Islam: the Jews, the Christians and the Quraysh (*in tinon jama'aton ki ankhen khulne ke liye allah ta'ala ne badr ke ma'rake ko ek nishani banaya*, ibid, p. 36), thereby underlining the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah once again.

Moreover, Islahi asserts that the symbolic similarity between *Badr* and the struggle between David and Goliath was quite clear to the Jews (*in donon jangon ki ye hairat angez mushabahat yahud par bilkul wazeh thi*, ibid). Both events were not just a test of physical strength but also a struggle between truth and falsehood (*badr ke maidan mein hathiyaron ki larai nahin thi balke haq o batil ki jang thi*, ibid). In spite of the fact that they recognized the spiritual nature of the battle, the Jews could not appreciate the value of the symbol provided for them by the Last Prophet and continued to oppose Islam (*unhone nabi akhir al zaman salla allahu alayhi wa sallam ki is nishani ki koi qadr nahin ki aur barabar islam ki mukhalafat hi karte rahey*, ibid, p. 37). Such opposition serves to confirm the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah that Islam was in the ascendancy.

According to Islahi, verses 26-27 make the proclamation, in the form of a prayer, that the mandate hitherto entrusted to the Israelites, will soon be transferred to the *Ismaelis* (*imamat o siyadat ka wo mansub jis par bani israil ab tak faiz rahe hain ab wo bani isma'il ki taraf muntaqil ho raha hai*, ibid, p. 63). Verse 26 reads:

Say: 'O God, Lord of all dominion! Thou grantest dominion unto whom Thou willest, and takest away dominion from whom Thou willest; and Thou exaltest whom Thou willest, and abasest whom Thou willest. In Thy hand is all good. Verily, Thou hast the power to will anything.'

Islahi repeats again and again that these verses indicate the deposition of the Jews and the ascendancy of the Muslim community (*ye ayat dar haqiqat yahud ke 'azl ka e'lan aur ummat-i-muslimah ke nash ki basharat hain*, ibid). This theme ('*umud*) is given various means of expression throughout the entire Surah.

Islahi explains why this theme (*'umud*) takes the form of a prayer in verses 26-27. Since, at the time of revelation, the believers did not have full knowledge of what would happen, the announcement of their eventual ascendancy takes the form of a prayer that they themselves express (*ayat ke nazul ke waqt tak halat abhi parde mein they aur jo chiz parde mein ho is ke muta'lliq yahi uslub mauzu hai ke ummat is ke liye du'a kare*, ibid). The prayer also contains the implication of the coming migration (*is du'a mein hijrat ki khabar bhi hai*, ibid, p. 64). Islahi reads these verses in the light of subsequent history.

In the next verse, the new community expresses its readiness for the new task given to them in the form of a prayer. Verse 27 reads:

“Thou makest the night grow longer by shortening the day, and Thou makest the day grow longer by shortening the night. And Thou bringest forth the living out of that which is dead, and Thou bringest forth the dead out of that which is alive. And Thou grantest sustenance unto whom Thou willest, beyond all reckoning.”

According to Islahi, the prayer implies that God has the power to bestow responsibility for the *shari'ah* or to take that responsibility away again (*shari'ah-i-ilahi ki ye amanat is ummat ke supurd ki ja rahi hai jis ko khuda ne is amanat ka ahl paya hai*, ibid, p. 58). The verse says that God has the power to give life and to take it back again. Islahi concludes that God can depose one community and raise up another and says that the verse refers to the deposition of the Jews and the coming to power of the Muslims (*yahud ke 'azl ka e'lan aur ummat-i-muslimah ke nash ki basharat hai*, ibid, p. 63). In fact, Islahi says the verse describes the death of the Jews and the life of the Muslim community (*ye ek latif ta'riz is surat-i-hal par bhi hai jo bani israil ki maut aur bani isma'il ki zindagi se numayan ho rahi thi*, ibid, pp. 64-65).

Islahi brings verses 45-63 together into one group because these verses deal with the Christians and provide an example of the theme of the Surah (*ab ye wo asl bat a rahi hai jo dar haqiqat surah ka 'umud hai*, ibid, p. 85). Islahi places the narrative in which the Prophet Jesus approaches the Jewish leaders into the context of the time the Qur'an was revealed and says that it is addressed to the Christians of that time (*is surah mein khitab nisara se hai*, ibid, p. 86). The verses describe how the Prophet Jesus made a final appeal to the Pharisees and leaders of the Jewish people (*is akhri koshish ka bani israil ke lidaron, faqihon, aur farisiyon par hua*, ibid). The verse

instructs the last Prophet to consider the Christians as unbelievers if they do not accept him despite the clarification given in this narrative (*nisara tum se . . . grez karen to samjh lo ke ye pake mufsid hain*, *ibid*). In other words, Islahi is presenting the Christians as a group that, according to the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah, is displaced by the coming of Islam.

Another verse that gives a clear expression of the theme ('*umud*) is verse 110:

You are indeed the best community that has ever been brought forth for (the good of) mankind: you enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong, and you believe in God.

Now if the followers of earlier revelation had attained to (this kind of) faith, it would have been for their own good; (but only few) among them are believers, while most of them are iniquitous.

Islahi says that, from the point of view of coherence (*nazm*) this verse is in line with the main topic concerning the deposition of the People of the Book and the rise of the Muslim community (*nazm ke 'itibar se ye ayat . . . is ummat ke mansub-imamat ka e'lan hai*, *ibid*, p. 161). The verse announces the mandate entrusted to the Muslim community, a community that is considered "best" for the good of mankind because, unlike the Jews and the Christians, this community accepted the Prophet and the Qur'an (*ab khair ummat ke mansub ke haqdar ye ahl iman hain na ke yahud o nisara*, *ibid*). Since the Jews and the Christians have not kept their covenant (*yahud o nisara donon ki bad ahdian wazeh kar chukne ke ha'd*, *ibid*), it is only fitting that, henceforward, the Muslim community be entrusted with this responsibility. Islahi's interpretation of verse 110 has clearly demonstrated how the verse contributes to the coherence (*nazm*, *ibid*) of the Surah and is an expression of its basic theme ('*umud*).

The Way of God

Islahi argues that it is essential for God to punish those who oppose his system of justice (*nizam-i-'adl o qist ke dushman*, *ibid*, p. 19). Not to punish these people would mean that God abandons the world to its own destruction (*agar allah ta'ala aisey logon ko chaur de . . . to is ke ma'ni ye hue ke us ne apni dunya ko tabahi ke liye chaur dia*, *ibid*). The fact that God is almighty implies that God will take revenge on those who oppose the truth (*wo is qist ke dusmanon se intiqam le*, *ibid*). For Islahi, this is the meaning of verse 4:

It is He who has bestowed (upon man) the standard by which to discern the true from the false.

Behold, as for those who are bent on denying God's messages – grievous suffering awaits them: for God is almighty, an avenger of evil.

Islahi says that such divine retribution is according to “the way of God” (*apni isi sunnat ko yahan intiqam se ta'bir farmaya hai*, *ibid*). After allowing such groups or nations to go their own way for an allotted period of time (*in ko muhlat dene ke ba'd*, *ibid*), God destroys them and allows other nations to emerge and to develop. The same notion is expressed in the words of verse 18 that describe God as “the Upholder of Equity” (*qaiman bilqist*). The nation that does not repent during the time allotted to it is replaced by another nation (*ek khas had tak muhlat de chukne ke ba'd wo is ko fana kar deta hai aur dusri qaum ko is ki waris banata hai*, *ibid*, p. 48).

On the basis of verse 6, which describes God as “the Almighty, the Truly Wise” (*al 'azizu al hakim*), Islahi argues that God must avenge evildoers - otherwise God is neglecting his role in the universe (*to ye kis tarah mumkin hai ke wo in logon se intiqam na lega jo allah ki is kitab ka inkar karenge jo is ne dunya mein az sar-i-nau haq o 'adl ke asar o 'alam ko ujar karne ke liye nazil farmai hai*, *ibid*, p. 20). Islahi seems to be implying that God must punish the opponents of Islam. We have here an example of the way Islahi reads the Surah in the light (*is roshni mein*, *ibid*, p. 14) of the theme (*'umud*) that he formulated in the introduction (*ham surah ke tamhidi muhahas mein wazeh kar chuke hain ke is surah ka 'umud islam hai*, *ibid*, p. 100).

The Qur'an gives a very clear presentation of the way God deals with nations in history (*quran ne is sunnat ko bari wazahat ke sath bayan farmaya hai*, *ibid*, p. 48).³¹ Surahs from other Surah Groups describe “the way of God” (*sunnat-i-ilahi*) in the same way. Islahi's rational approach to God's way of dealing with the nations supports his presentation of the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah according to which the Muslim community displaces the Jewish nation.

³¹ According to Islahi, verse 55 refers to the death of Jesus in terms of “migration” in accordance with “the way of God” (*sunnat-i-ilahi*, *ibid*, p. 105). Verses 137-138 are also explained according to this concept (*cf. ibid*, p. 179). Similarly, verse 153 is an illustration of the way God deals with nations (*qanun-i-ilahi*, *ibid*, p. 194) by allowing them to experience tests and trials (*cf. ibid*, p. 218).

Transcending the Specific Context

In the introduction to this Surah, Islahi says that it was revealed at a time when Islam had established itself (*is daur mein nazil hui hai jab ufuq par islam ke ghalbah aur is ki sadaqat ke asar itne numayan ho chuke hai*, ibid, p. 10). However, in his discussion of verses 196-198, Islahi describes the situation of the Muslims as weak and oppressed (*is waqt tak musalman abhi kamzaur aur mazlum they*, ibid, p. 232).³² According to the context (*mauqa' kalam dalil hai*, ibid), the addressees of these verses were the Muslims living in that environment (*khitab 'am musalmanon se hai*, ibid). Islahi explains how the singular pronoun used in verse 196 applies to everyone (cf. ibid).

Several of the verses of this Surah are placed in the context of the battle of Uhud (*qarina maujud ho . . . jang uhud ke waqiy'ah aur in se paida shuda asrat par*, ibid, p. 169). Hence, these verses are addressed to the Muslims who were involved in these struggles (*jo musalman allah ki rah mein jihad ke liye nikalte hain*, ibid, p. 171) and the angels who came to help them (according to verses 124-125) were sent to encourage *these Muslims* (*wo khas is jang ke liye*, ibid), who were fighting at this specific time (*is waqt*, ibid). Yet these events are a symbol or a lesson for all Muslims (*jang-i-uhud ke waqiy'ah shahid hain*, ibid, p. 172).

Islahi stresses the specific addressees of the certain verses. For example, he says that although verses 130-143 are addressed to everyone in general, these verses have a very specific context (*khitab agarche 'am hai lekin siyaq o sabaq dalil hai ke rue sakhan khas taur par inhi musalmanon ke taraf hai jin se is jang ke dauran mein koi kamzauri sadir hui thi*, ibid, p. 173). The period is clearly the time of revelation (*ab waqt a gaya tha*, ibid). At the same time, however, Islahi refers to people in a general way as if to include people living in every period and circumstance. In his discussion of verses 137-138, for example, Islahi seems to include everyone (*in logon ke liye*

³² Muhammad Yasin Mazhar Siddiqi writes that: "The Quraysh chiefs and other Makkans generally treated Makkan Muslims well, except in religious matters . . . The Prophet (peace be upon him) and the Companions lived in the midst of non-Muslims. It is wrong to assume that there was total segregation between Muslims and non-Muslims." p. 106. He goes on to say: "The Prophet (peace be upon him) . . . maintained normal social relations even with his enemies . . . Accordingly, Muslims followed this practice of the Prophet and had excellent social relations with their non-Muslim neighbours, relatives and residents of the town." Siddiqi (2006), p. 107.

hidayat o nasihat ka pura saman maujud hai jin ke andar khuda ka khauf hai, ibid, p. 180). Islahi does not explain the link between the specific context of the past and new situations that came later. For example, the parable in verse 112 is clearly a parable about the Jews (*quran ne ahl kitab past himmati ko nihayat haqiqat afroz tamsilon se jagah jagah wazeh farmaya hai*, ibid, 162). So is the parable of the dog in verse 176 of Surah Al A'raf (*kutte wali tamsil in ki past himmati hi ki tamsil hai*, ibid). The question is how these parables can have any meaning beyond the context of the Jews.

Furthermore, the phrase from verse 112 that is repeated in verse 181 describes the Jews as people who slay the prophets (*zahir hai ke yahud ka hai*, ibid, p. 219):

As well as their slaying of prophets against all right.

Similarly, verse 187 refers to the People of the Book but verse 190 draws a conclusion that is more universal (*matlab ye hai ke . . . jo log khuda se sar kushi kar rahe hain*, ibid, p. 223). Likewise, the prayer in verse 193 refers to the People of the Book (*yahan kalam mein pesh-i-nazr ahl kitab hi hain*, ibid, p. 230):

Let us die the death of the truly virtuous.

However, God gives an answer in verse 195 that has a universal application:

And thus does their Sustainer answer their prayer:

"I shall not lose sight of the labour of any of you who labours (in My way), be it man or woman."

In contrast, Islahi limits the scope of the phrase by saying that it is an expression of encouragement for all Muslim believers at the time of revelation (*tamam ahl-i-iman ki hauslah afzai hai jo da'wat islami ke is nazuk marhale mein . . . ut khare huey they*, ibid).

Moreover, Islahi limits verses 118-120 to their specific context by saying that these verses are directed in a general way to all Muslims but have a specific reference to those Muslims who did not pay heed to the designs of the Jews or who wanted to maintain the relationships they were enjoying in society at that time (*khitab agarche 'am hai lekin pesh-i-nazr . . . wo musalman hain jo . . . ahl kitab ki chalon ko achhi tarah samajhte nahin they*, ibid, p. 166). Islahi describes the context of the period in some detail, leaving the reader to find the meaning for the changed conditions of today. In the same way, Islahi describes the situation of at least three Muslim groups living at the time of the battle of Uhud in order to provide the background for verse 153 (*in tamam grohon ki taraf age ki ayat mein isharat*

a rahi hain, ibid, p. 195). Besides finding this background material existing in the text itself (*ayat mein isharat a rahi hain*), Islahi consults books of history and the *Sirah* to develop the context of these verses in more detail (*tarikh aur sirat ki kitabon mein bhi hai aur quran ki is ayat se bhi is ka isharah nikalta hai*, ibid, p. 193).³³

After giving a detailed description of the specific context of the People of the Book in order to provide the background of the Surah, Islahi concludes his discussion by mentioning the qualities of “all who are endowed with insight” (*li ulilalbab*, a phrase that Islahi translates as *ahl ‘aql*, ibid, p. 225). In other words, he moves from the specific context into a general description of all people who use their minds (*insan ke andar agar ‘aql-i-salim ho*, ibid, p. 229). Using all-inclusive language, Islahi says it is enough for anyone who wants to find God to simply remember him (*khuda ko paney ke liye ye kafi hai ke insan is ko yad rakhe*, ibid). Islahi proceeds to give five general conclusions that apply to any person who is endowed with insight (*ululalbab*, ibid, pp. 228-229).

Different Kinds of Language

Islahi says that allegorical verses in the Qur’an are addressed in a general way to all people. According to verse 7:

He it is who has bestowed upon thee from on high this divine writ, containing messages that are clear in and by themselves – and these are the essence of the divine writ – as well as others that are allegorical.

Since the verse intends to address a wide audience, there is no explicit mention of the Jews and the Christians. Islahi says that those who are sensitive to the style of the Qur’an will be able to conclude that the verse is directed to the Jews (*lekin quran ka zauq rakhne wale jante hai ke ishara inhi ki taraf hai*, ibid, p. 31). The widest sense of the verse is expressed precisely by leaving out any mention of the Jews and the Christians (*quran ne uslub-i-bayan ‘am hi rakha hai ta ke kalam mein wusa’t paida ho sake*, ibid). Similarly, the last verse of Surah *Al Fatiha* is addressed in a general way to everyone since that is the intention of the verse but the words of this verse have a particular bearing on the Jews and the Christians (*quran ke alfaz har chand ‘am hai aur in ke ‘am honey ke wajh se in mein bari wusa’t*

³³ Further references to the books of history and to the *sirah* (*tarikh o sirat ki kitabon*) can be found on p. 209 and on p. 216.

paida ho gayi hai lekin in ka khas isharah yahud o nisara ki taraf hai, ibid). It seems that Islahi is referring to the Jews and the Christians living at the time of revelation.

Furthermore, Islahi's remark on verse 200 is significant:

O you who have attained to faith! Be patient in adversity, and vie in patience with one another, and be ever ready (to do what is right), and remain conscious of God, so that you might attain to a happy state!

The original meaning of the word translated as "be ever ready" (*rabitu*) from this verse concerns the need to have strong horses ready for battle. Islahi has interpreted the word in the context of the Muslim community facing opposition from other groups in society. According to Islahi, this word from the Qur'an instructs the Muslims to face their enemies, not only with intellectual resources (*akhlaqi tayyari*) but also with material equipment (*madi tayyari*, *ibid*). More significantly, Islahi says that tanks and airplanes have replaced horses in today's world and so the meaning of this word will change further because of the change that has taken place in society (*halat ki tabdili se is lafz ka mafhum bhi tabdil ho jayega*, *ibid*, p. 233). It seems that Islahi wants to take the meaning of the word from the modern context of society. Does this principle of interpretation extend to other words in the Qur'an?

Islahi says that the correct meaning of a word that has a factual and a metaphorical sense is to be determined from the context (*sahih mahfum ke ta'yyan mein qarain ke muhtaj hote hain*, *ibid*, p. 103). For example, verse 55 reads,

Lo! God said: 'O Jesus! Verily, I shall cause thee to die, and shall exalt thee unto Me, and cleanse thee of (the presence of) those who are bent on denying the truth: and I shall place those who follow thee (far) above those who are bent on denying the truth, unto the Day of Resurrection. In the end, unto Me you all must return, and I shall judge between you with regard to all on which you were wont to differ.

Islahi explains that the verb "to die" is not used in a factual but in a metaphorical sense (*maut dene ke ma'ni mein is lafz ka iste'mal haqiqatan nahin balke mujazan hua hai*, *ibid*). Islahi develops four arguments why the factual interpretation of the verb "to die" in this verse should be rejected. The arguments are all based on textual evidence from different parts of the Qur'an (*siyaq o sabaq*, *ibid*) and on rational arguments (*mauqa' dalil*, *ibid*).

Instead of examining the evidence for or against his view, Islahi presents all the arguments that support his own view and appeals, ultimately, to the good sense of the reader to establish his argument as the correct one (*har sahib-i-zauq andaza kar sakta hai*, *ibid*, p. 104). Instead of examining the Surah, Islahi seems to be proving a point.

***Din* and the Religions**

In his discussion of verse 19, Islahi accuses Judaism and Christianity of creating two separate religions:

Behold, the only (true) religion in the sight of God is (man's) self-surrender unto Him; and those who were vouchsafed revelation aforetime took, out of mutual jealousy, to divergent views (on this point) only after knowledge (thereof) had come unto them. But as for him who denies the truth of God's messages – behold, God is swift in reckoning!

Despite the fact that the Prophet Jesus was given the *din* of God (*allah ke din*, *ibid*, p. 86) and that he instructed his disciples to go and to preach this form of *din* (*tabligh-i-din ki muhim par rauwana kiya*, *ibid*), Islahi says the Jews and the Christians created two separate forms of *din* out of the one religion of Abraham that the above verse describes as “self-surrender unto Him”. Islahi does not say that Judaism and Christianity became two different religions (*mazahab*),³⁴ but says that they became two separate *din* (*yahudiyat o nasraniyat ke namon se apne alag alag din khare kar liye*, *ibid*, p. 52). However, in the introduction to the Surah, Islahi says that *din* cannot be divided (*is din mein taqsim o tajziah ki koi gunjaish nahin hai ke is ke kuch hisse ko to mana jaye aur kuch ko na mana jaye*, *ibid*, p. 11). Furthermore, in his discussion of Surah *Al An'am*, Islahi says that *din* is basically one and the same (*asl din bunyadi taur par ek hi hai*, vol. 3, p. 205).

The next verse asks those who have received revelation aforetime whether they have surrendered themselves unto God. Verse 20 says:

Thus, (O Prophet,) if they argue with thee, say, “I have surrendered my whole being unto God, and (so have) all who follow me!” – and ask those who have been vouchsafed revelation aforetime, as well as

³⁴ Islahi uses the word *mazhab* in his reference to the crimes of the Jews in the history of religions (*mazahab ki tarikh*, *ibid*, p. 100). He refers to the history of religions again on p. 120 and on p. 144.

all unlettered people, “Have you (too) surrendered yourselves unto Him?”

And if they surrender themselves unto Him, they are on the right path; but if they turn away – behold, thy duty is no more than to deliver the message: for God sees all that is in (the hearts of) His creatures.

The verse invites those who received revelation aforetime, including the Jews and the Christians, to come back to the original *din* of self-surrender to God. Islahi, however, says the verse indicates that the Jews and the Christians have deliberately mutilated *din* (*ayat ka matlab ye hai ke yahud o nisara ne jis waqt allah ke din – islam – ko yahudiyat o nasraniyat ki surat mein maskh kiya jan bujh kar maskh kiya*, *ibid*, p. 54). Islahi does not consider the possibility that the Jews and the Christians were not arguing about “self-surrender to God” (*din* or *islam*) but about *political* matters and about the history of religion (*mazhab*). In the Qur’an, the verse is a call to *din*. However, Islahi turns it into a statement about the religion (*mazhab*) of the Jews and the Christians.

Islahi’s discussion of verse 85 also implies that Judaism and Christianity are separate religions. Verse 85 says:

For, if one goes in search of a religion other than self-surrender unto God, it will never be accepted from him, and in the life to come he shall be among the lost.

Islahi does not differentiate between the word *mazhab* and the word *din* and says that Judaism and Christianity are examples of such religions (*islam ke siwa kisi aur din ke talib banenge . . . ‘am is se ke wo yahudiyat ho ya nasraniyat ya koi aur din*, *ibid*, p. 137). Islahi gives the impression that there are several kinds of *din* from which one can choose.

Furthermore, the reference Islahi makes to “the last *din*” (*akhri din*, *ibid*, p. 82)³⁵ points to the development of *din* in history. Islahi describes the quarrels that the opponents of Islam were having at that time, each party claiming that it possessed the true religion of Abraham (*asl din-i-ibrahim ke hamil ham hain*, *ibid*, p. 114). But, as verse 67 says:

Abraham was neither a “Jew” nor a “Christian”, but was one who turned away from all that is false, having surrendered himself unto God; and he was not of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside Him.

³⁵ Islahi uses the same expression (*akhri din*) again on p. 121.

The verse implies that *din* is the common possession of the Jews, the Christians and the Muslims since all these groups inherited *din* from their common ancestor, Abraham and could, therefore, be called *hanif* (*hanif muslim they*, ibid, p. 115). In contrast, Islahi dwells on the way the Jews and the Christians have diverted from *din* (*yahudiyat aur nasraniyat tauhid se hati hui*, ibid).

Islahi says that even the unbelievers among the Quraysh claimed that they were followers of the *din* of Abraham (*quraysh ke mushrikin . . . in ka to ye da'wa tha ke jis din par wo hain, ye din un ko hazrat ibrahim hi se warasat mein mila hai*, ibid). In other words, many groups throughout history have claimed that they are followers of *din*. In fact, since the created world obeys the laws of God, it also is an expression of *din* (*yahi din is puri kainat ka din hai*, ibid, p. 136) and anyone who lives according to reason and nature (*din-i-firat*, ibid) is a follower of *din* (*suraj, chand, abr, hawa aur asman o zamin sab is din ke pairon hain*, ibid). In this case, how can *din* be the prerogative of any one particular group in history?

Islahi has not dealt with the basic problem of “the unity of religions” that he presented in the introduction to the Surah. According to Islahi, there were various responses to the emergence of the Muslim community at the time of revelation. Islahi says that one group argued for a compromise based on the fact that the followers of every religion claim they are following the truth (*har mazhab ke pairon ke liye in ka apna din haq hai*, ibid). For this reason, the members of this group argued that the Muslims should leave them alone to follow Judaism or Christianity. Correspondingly, the Jews and the Christians would leave the Muslims alone to follow Islam (*musalman ham ko hamari yahudiyat o nasraniyat par chaur den aur ham musalmanon ko in ke islam par. is tarah donon apne apne din par qaim rahte hue ek hi mulk mein ek sath aman ki zindagi basar kar sakege*, ibid). Islahi says that many people in the modern world who promote “the unity of religions” (*wahdat adyan*, ibid, p. 10, *footnote*) hold this view. Hence, Islahi should have made a more satisfactory response to it.

Conclusions

The concept of a final, perfect form of *din* (*akhri din*, *ibid*, p. 82) implies that *din* gradually became more complete in the course of history. On the basis of Islahi's historical approach to *din*, I draw the following conclusions:

1. Since *din* is one and undivided (*din mein taqsim o tajziah ki koi gunjaish nahin hai*, *ibid*, p. 11), the earlier forms of *din* are not necessarily wrong or corrupt, as Islahi maintains. It is more correct to refer to different historical manifestations of *din*.
2. A distinction must be made between *islam* as the act of self-surrender to God and *Islam*, in the sense of a community one joins. The claim that *islam* is the only true form of *din* (*allah ka din to islam hai aur yahi din is tamam kainat ka din hai*, *ibid*, p. 130) refers to the act of self-surrender to God and not to the religion of Islam as a community with its own laws and doctrines.³⁶ By failing to make this distinction clearly, Islahi often confuses Islam with the original religion of Abraham (*din-i-ibrahimi*).
3. *Din* is the common possession of the Jews, the Christians and the Muslims since all these groups inherited *din* from their common ancestor, Abraham. However, Islahi highlights the way the Jews and the Christians mutilated *din* (*yahudiyat o nasraniyat ki surat mein maskh kiya*, *ibid*, p. 54). Consequently, he stresses the *differences* that separate the various religious communities rather than the many aspects they have in common.

In order to bring out the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah about the establishment of Islamic society and government, Islahi has selected certain verses of the Surah and interpreted them in a particular way. For instance, he says that the "bond with God" mentioned in verse 103 refers to the inter-relationship and organization that developed within the Muslim community and paved the way for the covenant that God made with the Muslims to uphold the system of equity in the world. However, this is not the only interpretation this verse can have.

³⁶ As Waardenburg says: "For a long time, deep into the Medinan period, *islam* is the act of self-surrender to the divine will, stepping out of the status of a *jahil* into that of a *muslim*, which remains for a long time an active participle before being used as a noun. According to Surah 51.36, there were also *muslimun* before the emergence of the historical religion of Islam.

Only much later does *islam* become a full noun and the name of the new religion, but even then it retains to some extent its *masdar* aspect. Later *ashlama*, too, acquires the technical meaning of joining the community in an external way (S. 49.14) without certainty about the inner conviction of the convert." Waardenburg (2003), p. 105.

In order to consolidate the basic theme ('*umud*) of the Surah, Islahi interprets verses 26-27 in the light of the mandate that will soon be transferred from the Jews to the Muslims. Hence, verse 26 refers to the deposition of the Jews and to the ascendancy of the Muslims (*yahud ke 'azl ka e'lan aur ummat-i-muslimah ke nasb ki basharat hai*, *ibid*, p. 63). In the same way, Islahi connects verse 27 (regarding the power of God to lengthen the night and shorten the day) with the same theme concerning the annihilation of the Jewish community and the coming to life of the Muslim community (*bani israil ki maut aur bani isma'il ki zindagi*, pp. 64-65). In fact, Islahi says that verse 110 describes the Muslims as "the best community". He has restricted the meaning of all these verses to the particular community of Muslims in Medina and has failed to bring out their universality.

For Islahi, all these verses demonstrate that the Qur'an is thematically coherent because they all reiterate the theme ('*umud*) that he formulates at the outset (*is roshni mein puri surah ki tilawat kijiye to ayat ka bahimi nazm samajhne mein bari asani hogi*, *ibid*, p. 14). In the preface to Surah *An Nisa*, for example, Islahi reminds the reader of the Surah to keep in mind the interconnectedness expressed in the last verse of Surah *Al 'Imran* (*is roshni mein ghaur kijiye to is surah mein goya is irtabat bahimi ki buniyaden ustawar ki gai hain jis ki hidayat par sabiq surah khatam hui thi*, vol. 2, p. 238). Similarly, Islahi highlights the thematic coherence of the Surah in the preface to Surah *Al Baqarah* (*is haqiqat ki roshni mein agar ghaur kijiye*, vol. 1, p. 75) and also in the preface to Surah *Al Maidah* (*surah ke nazam ko samajhne ke liye ye isharat bhi kafi hain*, *ibid*, p. 444). In every case, Islahi develops his argument about the thematic coherence of the Qur'an by selecting and interpreting certain verses in the light of the theme ('*umud*) he has formulated. By doing so, he misses the more universal or eternal meaning of the Qur'an.³⁷

Islahi says the last verse of Surah *Al Fatihah* is addressed in a general way to everyone but that it has a particular bearing on the Jews and the Christians

³⁷ Hanafi discusses the inherent dangers of a thematic approach to the Qur'an. He writes: "Thematic interpretation is a relativist approach to the Qur'an text which denies the existence of a true interpretation, which would be valid for all times and spaces. Once every interpreter or every generation has the right to interpret the Qur'an according to his or their interest, the eternal meaning of the Qur'an will disappear. Human passions and moods would destroy the objectivity of the meaning of the text. Would there be any criterion of validity in the event of contradictory and mutually exclusive interpretations? The answer is: an eternal meaning of the Qur'an is a hypothesis and a presupposition for which there is no proof." Hanafi in Wild (1996), p. 210.

(*in ka khas isharah yahud o nisara ki taraf hai*, ibid, p. 31). What purpose is served by remembering that this verse may originally have referred to the Jews and Christians? The issue is how the modern believer, who recites this verse everyday, should understand it. Moreover, Islahi restricts the meaning of the parable in verse 112 of Surah *Al 'Imran* to the Jews living at the time of revelation.³⁸ However, these parables have a much wider connotation.

Islahi hints at a principle of interpretation that could have far-reaching implications for understanding the Qur'an. Reflecting on the meaning of the word *rabit* (be ever ready) from verse 200, he recognizes the changes that have taken place in modern methods of warfare and indicates that the meaning of a word will change because of the changes that are taking place in society (*halat ki tabdili se is lafz ka mafhum bhi tabdil ho jaega*, ibid, p. 233). However, Islahi does not apply this principle beyond a few words of the Surah because he remains preoccupied with the past context and background of revelation, which he discovers in the text of the Surah (*ayat mein isharah a rahi hai*, ibid, p. 193) as well as in the books of history (*tarikh o sirat ki kitabon mein*, ibid).³⁹ In other words, Islahi does not demonstrate how this principle can be used effectively.

³⁸ In my discussion on Surah *Al A'raf*, I will discuss how Islahi restricts the meaning of the parable about the dog in verse 176 to the Jews. Cf. vol. 3, p. 397.

³⁹ Islahi refers to the same need for adaptation to the changing conditions of modern society in his discussion of verse 102 of Surah *An Nisa* (Cf. vol. 2, p. 372) and again in verses 15-16 of Surah *Al Anfal* (Cf. vol. 3, p. 450). I discuss these verses in the relevant sections of my study.

Surah An Nisa

Introduction: the Theme of the Surah and its Link with the Previous Surah

The opening words of this Surah indicate that it should be considered a natural complement to its predecessor (*al 'imran ka takmila o tamtamah hai*, vol. 2, p. 237). Indeed, the final topic of Surah *Al 'Imran* forms the preface (*tamhid*, *ibid*) of Surah *An Nisa*, revealing a subtle link (*halqah ittisal*, *ibid*) between the closing of the former Surah and opening of the present one. Islahi refers to verse 200 of Surah *Al 'Imran*:

O you who have attained to faith! Be patient in adversity, and vie in patience with one another, and be ever ready (to do what is right), remain conscious of God, so that you might attain to a happy state!

Islahi's Urdu translation of the above verse brings out a different emphasis from Asad's English translation:

ai imanwalo, sabr karo, sabit qadam raho, muqable ke liye taiyyar raho aur allah se darte raho ta ke tum kamyab raho!

Islahi highlights the need to be firmly united in confronting the enemy (*apes mein jure, dushman ke muqabil mein date*, *ibid*).

The first verse of Surah *An Nisa* begins with a similar injunction:

O mankind! Be conscious of your Sustainer.

Islahi says that Surah *An Nisa*, like the previous Surah, proceeds to encourage the believers to remain united in the confrontation of their opponents (*apes mein jure rahna aur mukhalafin ke muqabil sabit qadami*, *ibid*). Moreover, Islahi stresses the need to remain united as a group (*ijtima'i sabit qadami baghair mazbut jama'ti ittisal ke mumkin nahin hai*, *ibid*). Such unity does not come accidentally but needs careful planning (*masbat tadabir ka bhi mutaqazi hai*, *ibid*). Consequently, Surah *An Nisa* explains everything that is necessary for the development and maintenance of Islamic society and government (*islami mu'sharah aur is ke fitri natijah islami hukumat ko mustahakam rakhne aur is ko intishar se bachane ke liye zaruri hai*, *ibid*).

Furthermore, an overview of the meanings of the Surah (*is surah ke matalab*, *ibid*) will show that Islamic government is based on the principle that one God created both man and woman. The Surah also presents the

rights of the most vulnerable sections of society, namely, orphans and women and stresses that their rights, including their right to inherit, must be respected (cf. *ibid*). Next, the Surah emphasizes the mutual rights that Muslims have with respect to one another and focuses on the very basis of Islamic government (*islami hukumat ki bunyad*, *ibid*, p. 238), which is the common agreement to obey God, his Messenger and the elders (*allah, rasul aur aululamr ki ita'at par sab ko mujtama' o muttafiq rahne ki takid farmai*, *ibid*).

Finally, the Surah gives detailed attention to the machinations of the hypocrites, which fester like an ulcer within Islamic society. Islahi says that the Jews and the Christians acted as agents for these enemies of the Muslims (*musalmamon ke andar in ke dushmanon yahud o nisara ke agent ke taur par kam kar rahe they*, *ibid*). Seen in this light (*is raushni mein*, *ibid*), the Surah strengthens the interrelationship (*irtabat bahimi*, *ibid*) that the previous Surah mentioned in its last verse.

Identifying the Addressees

Farahi said very clearly that the addressee is an important key to understanding the Qur'an.⁴⁰ Islahi illustrates the significance of the addressee in his discussion of this Surah. For instance, verse 102 begins with the following sentence:

Thus, when thou art among the believers and about to lead them in prayer, let (only) part of them stand up with thee, retaining their arms.

The second person pronoun in this sentence refers primarily to the Prophet because the form that prayer should take in time of war was specially related to the presence of the Prophet (*nabi salla allahu alayhi wa sallam ki maujudgi se tha*, *ibid*, p. 372). In modern times, war has completely changed its mode of operation and the presence of the Prophet is no longer an issue. Accordingly, to suit the needs of the situation, any form of prayer can be adopted (*is zamane mein awwal to jang ki surat hi bilkul tabdil ho chuki hai. dusre hazur ki maujudgi ka sawal bhi nahin hai*, *ibid*). Islahi views the addressees in their historical context by highlighting the period in which the verses were revealed and concluding that the changed conditions in the world do not permit a literal understanding of the directive made in the Qur'an. More often, however, Islahi is context to identify the specific

⁴⁰ *Tafsir-i-Qur'an ke Usul*, by Imam Hamid Udin Farahi, edited by Khalid Masud, Lahore, 1999. Cf. the chapter: *kalam mein mukhtab ki sahih ta'in*, pp. 165-177.

addressees of a verse without making any further comment on the changed conditions in society.

Verse 105 is also addressed to others through the Prophet:

Behold, We have bestowed upon thee from on high this divine writ, setting forth the truth, so that thou mayest judge between people in accordance with what God has taught thee. Hence, do not contend with those who are false to their trust.

Islahi says that, though the verse is addressed to the Prophet, God intends to rebuke all Muslims who associate themselves with the hypocrites (*is mein khitab ka rukh in musalmanon ki taraf hai jo munafikin ki himayat karte they*, *ibid.* p. 378). The Prophet is addressed in his role as representative of the community (*bahaisiyat ummat ke wakil*, *ibid*) because the people whom the verse intends to rebuke do not deserve to be addressed directly (*goya wo laiq khitab nahin*, *ibid*). Islahi explains that, though the addressee may be the Prophet, it usually becomes clear through the gradual evolution of the text to whom the verse is addressed (*kalam ke tadriji irtiqa se un ka asli rukh bhi wazeh ho gaya hai ke khitab fil haqiqat kin se hai*, *ibid*).

Another illustration is available in the following words from the same verse:

So that thou mayest judge between people in accordance with what God has taught thee.

Islahi says these words are directed to the Prophet and, through him to the groups about whom he had to make a judgment (*is mein isharah kin ki taraf hai*, *ibid.* p. 379). Similarly, verses 109-112 and many other verses are addressed to the Prophet, not as an individual but as representing certain members of the Muslim community (*mukhatab . . . shakhsan nahin hai balke musalmanon mein se wo log hain*, *ibid.* p. 380). By emphasizing specific members of the community living in that period, Islahi has excluded other addressees from subsequent periods of time.

Islahi says that verse 19 and verse 22 refer to particular classes of Arabic society (*'arab jahiliyat ke ba'z tabqat*, *ibid.* p. 272) but the words used in the verse indicate that it has universal significance (*khitaab 'am hota hai. yahan is burai ke liye jo alfaz iste'mal farmaye hai wo khud shahid hain*, *ibid*). Similarly, Islahi says verses 174-175 are addressed in a general way to all people living at the time of revelation:

O mankind! A manifestation of the truth has now come unto you from you Sustainer, and We have sent down unto you a clear light. And as for those who have attained to faith in God and hold fast unto Him –

He will enfold them within His grace and bounty, and guide them unto Himself by a straight way.

The light mentioned in this verse is the Qur'an ('*nur mubin*' se murad quran majid hai, ibid, p. 438) and the verse intends to include all people: the Muslims, the People of the Book and the Arabs (*is ayat ka khitab 'am hai jis mein musalman, ahl kitab aur ahl 'arab sab a gaye hain*, ibid). Islahi does not make it clear whether the verse is addressed to an even wider audience, including the modern reader.

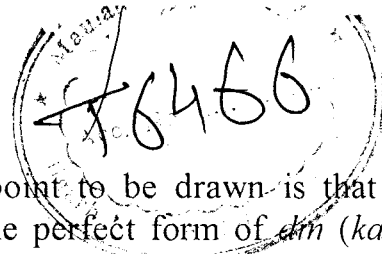
The Shape of *Din*

In Surah *Al Baqarah*, Islahi used various phrases to describe the development of *din* in history. Now, in Surah *An Nisa*, he refers to the human elements that have corrupted *din* so that the true *din* can no longer be recognized. Islahi says that verse 170 is directed to the Christians who are responsible for this corruption:

O mankind! The Apostle has now come unto you with the truth from your Sustainer: believe, then, for your own good! And if you deny the truth – behold, unto God belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth, and God is indeed all-knowing, wise!

Islahi states that the above verse must be directed to the Christians because the next verse (verse 171) is addressed to the Christians (*rue sakhan ahl kitab bilkhusus nisara ke taraf hai*, ibid, p. 434). However, only a few verses later in verse 174, the same phrase “O mankind!” occurs and Islahi says the verse is directed to all: Muslims, the People of the Book and the Arabs (*is ayat ka khitab 'am hai jis mein musalman, ahl kitab aur ahl 'arb sab a gaye hain*, ibid, p. 438). If the phrase “O mankind” has a universal connotation in verse 174, could it not also have a universal connotation in verse 170?

Verse 170 says that the shape of the perfect *din* has finally appeared (*ab in tamam malawaton se pak ho kar din az sar-i-nau apni kamil shakl mein tumhare pas a gaya hai*, ibid, p. 434). Islahi does not investigate what he means by the *shape* of the perfect *din*. Since verse 171 refers to the excesses that were common among Christians, verses 170-171 seem to urge the reform of Christianity. In fact, Islahi says that corruption in the area of *din* is present in all religious communities, including the Muslims (*ghalu mein tamam ahl mazahab muqtala huey hain, yahan tak ke ham musalman bhi, jin ko 'adl o qist par qaim rahne ki sab se ziyadah takid hui hai, is fitne mein*



mubtala ho gaye, ibid, p. 435). The main point to be drawn is that no religious community can claim it possesses the perfect form of *din* (*kamil shakl*) because every expression of *din* has a human and, therefore, a limited shape or expression.

The best shape or expression of *din* is to surrender one's whole being unto God, in the words of verse 125 (*wa man ahsanu dinan miman aslama wajhahu lilahi wa hua muhsinun*):

And who could be of better faith than he who surrenders his whole being unto God and is a doer of good withal, and follows the creed of Abraham, who turned away from all that is false – seeing that God exalted Abraham with his love?

Islahi says that the above verse expresses the religion of Abraham (*yahi millet ibrahim hai*, p. 392). Furthermore, the previous verse does not refer to any particular group but says that anyone who believes and does good deeds shall enter paradise. Verse 124 says:

Whereas anyone – be it man or woman – who does (whatever he can) of good deeds and is a believer withal, shall enter paradise, and shall not be wronged by as much as (would fill) the groove of a date-stone.

Islahi says that the above verse makes no distinction between men and women, Israeli or *Ismaeli*, Arab or non-Arab (*khwa wo mard ho ya 'aurat, israili hai ya ismaili, 'arab hai ya 'ajmi*, ibid). The verse seems to imply that no distinction need be made between Jew and non-Jew, Christian and non-Christian. True *din* is not a question of group identity but of faith and good deeds. Yet Islahi seems to return to the idea of “group membership” when he says that true *din* belongs to those who accept Islam (*asl din un logon ka hai jo islam ke pairo hain*, ibid, p. 384). If *din* is the attitude of one who “surrenders his whole being unto God” (in the words of verse 125), however, it cannot be the possession of any group or religion.

The Jews as a Group

In contrast to these conclusions about *din*, Islahi highlights the existence of various groups at the time of revelation. For instance, Islahi links verses 48-52 of Surah *An Nisa* with verses 286-288 of Surah *Al Baqarah* and concludes that these verses concern the Jews (cf. ibid, p. 312). Islahi describes the Jews in a general way as people who considered themselves the beloved of God (*ye apne ap ko ek bartar aur barguzidah groh samajhte hain*, ibid, p. 313) but also as the opponents of Islam (*yahud islam ki*

mukhalafat mein, ibid, p. 314). Furthermore, Islahi refers to the Jews to illustrate the following words from verse 135:

Do not, then, follow your own desires, lest you swerve from justice: for if you distort (the truth), behold, God is indeed aware of all that you do!

Although there is no clear indication from the context (*qarina*), Islahi states that the above words refer to the Jews (*yahud ko . . . wo baten to mante they jo apni khawahishon ke mutabiq pate lekin jo baten in ki khawahishon ke khilaf parten in se kini kat jatey*, ibid, p. 406). However, these words could have a far wider scope than the Jews.

Islahi says that verse 137 refers to an actual event (*ye bayan waqiy'ah hai*, ibid, p. 409). His reason for saying this is that the Jews were doing precisely what this verse describes (*ye munafikin ziyadatar al kitab bil khusus yahud mein se they*, ibid):

Behold, as for those who come to believe, and then deny the truth, and again come to believe, and again deny the truth, and thereafter grow stubborn in their denial of the truth – God will not forgive them, nor will He guide them in any way.

According to Islahi, the Jews are people who will not be forgiven because they have been granted sufficient evidence for belief in the message (*ab in par hujjat tamam ho chuki hai*, ibid).⁴¹ The Jews are those that will not be forgiven, according to in verses 167-168:

Behold, those who are bent on denying the truth and on turning others away from the path of God have indeed gone far astray . . . God will indeed not forgive them nor will He guide them onto any road.

It seems that Islahi's description of the Jews demonstrates the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah about the need to replace the Jews by the *shari'ah* and the Muslim community. Furthermore, Islahi says that verses 150-152, which speak of those who deny God and his apostles, point to the People of the Book as examples of those who do not believe (*pakke kafir to dar haqiqat ye ahl kitab hi hai*, ibid, p. 415). Islahi has used these and similar verses to describe the constant behaviour of a whole group or nation.

Finally, verse 159 refers to the People of the Book collectively:

Yet there is not one of the followers of earlier revelation who does not, at the moment of his death, grasp the truth about Jesus; and on the

⁴¹ Islahi uses precisely the same words for the Jews and the Christians on p. 424.

Day of Resurrection he (himself) shall bear witness to the truth against them.

Islahi says that the Jews and the Christians are referred to as a group, not as individuals (*yahan jo bat bayan hui hai wo donon grohon se bahaisiyat groh ke muta'lluq hai, bahaisiyat afrad ke nahin*, ibid, p. 422). Islahi implies that all verses that speak of the Jews and the Christians consider them as a group.

The Muslims as a Group

In his introduction, Islahi explained that Surah *An Nisa* describes the development of the Muslim community and the rise of Islamic society. Consequently, Islahi describes the Muslims as a separate community or society living in the *dar ul islam* as opposed to the *dar al harb* in order to illustrate the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah (*ab in tamam ghair ma'zur musalmanon ko jo ab tak dar ul harb mein pare huey they, hijrat par ubhara hai*, ibid, p. 365). For example, Islahi discusses verses 92-93 concerning the killing of a believer living outside the securities provided within Islamic society (*jo dar ul kufr aur dar ul harb mein ghire hue hone ki wajah se islami shari'at ke in tahaffuzzat se bhi mahrum tha jo dar ul islam mein ek musalman ko hasil hoti hain*, ibid, p. 361). Islahi highlights the boundaries between the Muslims and the non-Muslims.

Islahi says that one of the verses that addresses the Muslims as a group is verse 136:

O you who have attained to faith! Hold fast unto your belief in God and in His Apostle and in the divine writ which He has bestowed from on high upon His Apostle, step by step, as well as in the revelation which He has sent down aforetime.

Islahi says these words are addressed to the Muslims as a group (*yahan musalmanon min hais al jama't mukhatab hai*, ibid, p. 408).

Islahi uses the word *Islam* in the sense of Muslim society when he refers to the three sources of authority in Islam (*islam mein amr o ta'at ke markaz tin hain. allah, rasul, ululamr*, ibid, p. 324). Moreover, Islahi says the guidance contained in verse 59 is intended for the Muslim community as a whole (*ye hidayat ummat ko bahaisiyat ummat di gayi hai*, ibid, p. 325).

Moreover, verse 95 is addressed to “the believers” and “those who strive hard” in contrast to “those who remain passive”:

Such of the believers as remain passive – other than the disabled – cannot be deemed equal to those who strive hard in God’s cause with their possessions and their lives. God has exalted those who strive hard with their possessions and their lives far above those who remain passive.

Islahi seems to limit the scope of the verse by discussing it in terms of the Muslims (*ab ye tamam ghair ma'zur musalmanon ko jihad par ubhara hai*, ibid, p. 363), using the words “believers” and “Muslims” interchangeably without investigating the impact this may have on the way the Surah is understood. Islahi refers to the life of a believer (*mumin ki jhan*, ibid, p.363) and the life of a Muslim (*musalman ki jhan*, ibid) as if these terms are identical. However, Islahi also says that believers are people who are of sound mind (*salim al fitrat log hain*, ibid, p. 425) and who are prominent in society (*tamam sosaiti mein mumtaz*, ibid), thereby broadening the identity of a believer.

In line with this broader concept of faith, Islahi’s emphasis on the *intention* with which one performs *hijrah* (according to verses 97-100) implies that all believers, both Muslims and non-Muslims, could be included and could practice *hijrah*. Islahi says that, in order to attain the rewards of *hijrah*, it is not necessary to enter the domain of *hijrah*. It would be enough to show one’s intention to perform *hijrah* in the way of God and His Apostle by standing outside one’s house (*zaruri nahin ke admi dar al hijrat mein pahunch hi jaye balke sirf ye kafi hai ke allah o rasul ki taraf hijrat ke irade se admi ghar se nikl khara ho*, ibid, p. 365). *Hijrat* is, therefore, primarily a matter of personal attitude or intention.

On the other hand, Islahi also describes *hijrah* in terms of a Muslim believer (*hijrat ye hai ke musalman . . . apne din o iman par qaim rahna*, ibid) and in terms of the domain of Islam (*dar al islam*, p. 366) and the domain of non-Islam (*dar al harb*, ibid, p. 350) as well as the domain of the unbelievers (*dar al kufr*, ibid, p. 365). Islahi presumes that the traditional understanding of these terms is still valid but they refer to the physical boundaries of Islamic society in the past. These terms need to be adjusted to conditions in the modern world according to the directions that Islahi gives for verses 92-93, which concern the law of indemnity in the case of manslaughter (*wo*

zamanah aur halat ke taghayyar se apne asl maqsud ko baqi rakhte huey mutaghayyar ho jate hain . . . is taghayyar ki nau'yat ko te karna arbab-i-ijtihad ka kam hai, ibid, p. 361). According to this principle, the main purpose (*asl maqsud*) of any directive in the Qur'an should be kept in mind in order to discover its meaning in the changed circumstances of the world.

The Christians as a Group

Islahi refers to the Christians as one group, without recognizing the significant differences that exist among them. It is not clear to which group of Christians he is referring when he describes them as having a position of power (*nisara ko to yun samjhe ke is fasad mein imamat ka darja hasil hai*, ibid, p. 435). Islahi uses the word *nisara* (cf. ibid) and another word *'esaiyon* (cf. ibid, p. 437) to refer to Christians living at the time the Qur'an was revealed and to Christians living at the time of Christ. These terms are used even for Christians living today. Islahi assumes that Christians from different historical periods can be classified together as one group with the same way of thinking.

Furthermore, Islahi shows no awareness of the several theologies in the New Testament that are non-Pauline. He says that all Christians have gone astray because of St. Paul (*asl gumrahi ka mauad paul ki ta'limat mein hai*, ibid, p. 435) and describes the *din* of all Christians, both those of the past as well as those of the present, as worthless (*unhone apne is ghalu ke sabab se pure din ka huliya bigar kar rakh dia*, ibid). In fact, all responsibility has been taken away from the Christians (*nisara . . . 'amal o ata'at ki tamam zimmadariyon se subkadosh hain*, ibid, p. 390). This leaves the way open for the coming of the Muslim community, according to the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah.

The Nations

The Qur'an refers to nations rather than to individuals. For example, God provides sufficient evidence for all the nations referred to in verses 41-42 (*in par itmam-i-hujjat kar di . . . allah ta'ala ummaton aur in ke paighambaron ko jama' kar ke*, ibid, p. 300). Furthermore, verse 165 says that God does not punish any people before sending them a Prophet with complete arguments for faith (*wo kisi ko saza de to itmam-i-hujjat ke ba'd hi de*, ibid, p. 432). Islahi understands verse 168 in the same way:

Behold, those who are bent on denying the truth and on evildoing – God will indeed not forgive them, not will He guide them onto any road.

There is no possibility of forgiveness for these people because they have refused to believe after God has told them everything they need to know through the Prophets (*ab in ke liye rah-i-haq ki taraf morne ka koi imkan hi baqi nahin raha hai . . . us ne in par hujjat tamam kar di*, *ibid*, p. 433).

The Theme of the Surah

According to Islahi, the coherence of this Surah is quite clear (*nazmi-i-kalam bilkul wazeh hai*, *ibid*, p. 401) and he demonstrates its coherence by showing how the verses express the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah. For instance, verse 26 speaks of God's wish to form a new community:

God wants to make (all this) clear unto you, and to guide you onto the (righteous) ways of life of those who preceded you, and to turn unto you in His mercy; for God is all-knowing, wise.

Since God would not abandon his people without guidance (*gumrahi mein bhatakne ke liye chaur de*, *ibid*), God chooses to form a community of Muslims (*tumhen is maqsud ke liye muntakhab farmaya hai*, *ibid*, p. 282)⁴² that will live according to the law of God (*akhri bi'sat ke zariy'ah se ek aisi ummat ka barpa karna jo purey din o shari'at ki hamil . . . ho*, *ibid*). Islahi has understood the verse in the light of the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah.

Furthermore, in line with the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah, Islahi highlights the word “dominion”, which appears in both verses 53 and verse 54:

Have they, perchance, a share in (God's) dominion? But (if they had), lo, they would not give to other people as much as (would fill) the groove of a date-stone!

Do they, perchance, envy other people for what God has granted them out of His bounty? But then, We did grant revelation and wisdom unto the House of Abraham, and We did bestow on them a mighty dominion.

In verse 53, the word “dominion” refers to God's power and authority (*khudai iqtidar o ikhtiyar*, *ibid*, p. 315) and the word for “people” signifies the Muslims (*musalman hain*, *ibid*). The context indicates that the reference to “the House of Abraham”, mentioned in verse 54, denotes the *Ismaelis* as a

⁴² Islahi describes the Muslim community as a community chosen by God. However, the Jews also thought of themselves as the chosen and beloved people of God (*apne ap ko ek bartar aur barguzidah groh samajhte hai*, *ibid*, p. 313).

clan (*ahl-i-ibrahim agarche 'am hain lekin yahan murad bani isma'il hain. qarina is par dalil hai*, ibid). The verse asks whether those without power and authority wish to deprive the Muslims of this power and authority (*apne isi ikhtiyar ki bina par wo musalmanon ko khuda ke fazal o karam se mahrum rakhna chahte hain?* ibid). The implication is that these verses support the view, expressed in the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah, that God is encouraging the Muslims to develop an Islamic society and government.

The above verses provide further support for the theme (*'umud*) because they contain the promise made by God to Abraham and to his descendants that he would make them a mighty nation (*allah ta'ala in ko ek 'azim ummat banayega*, ibid, p. 316). The promise consists of the following three aspects:

1. God will make them into a great nation (*ek 'azim ummat banayega*, ibid).
2. They will make great conquests (*'azim futuhat hasil hong*i, ibid) and take control of their enemies' ramparts.
3. Their descendants will be a blessing for all the nations of the world (*zamin ki sab qaumen barkat payengi*, ibid).

Islahi quotes the passage from Genesis 22 to this effect (cf. ibid) and says that God fulfilled every aspect of the promise through the appearance of the Last Prophet (*ye tinon wa'de an hazrat salla allahu alayhi wa sallam ki bi'sat se pure huey*, ibid). It is clear that Islahi understands this verse as a reference to the coming to power of the Muslim community, which had not yet taken place at the time the verse was revealed (*agarche jis waqt ye ayat nazil hui hain is waqt tak ye wa'dah mukamil taur par zahir nahin hua tha*, ibid). The style of the Qur'an (*is uslub bayan*, ibid) indicates that God decides to make this happen before the event actually takes place.

Hence, these verses indicate how God fashions the new community of Muslims into leaders and vice-gerents (*is ko imamat o khilafat ka mansub bhi saunp dia gaya*, ibid, p. 317). The Jews felt jealous of this new community (*yahud ka sara hasad*, ibid) because they knew God had given the Muslims "a mighty sovereignty" (*ham ne na sirf kitab o hikmat in ko di balke is ke sath hi ek 'azim sultanat bhi in ko di*, ibid). It is clear that Islahi has interpreted the verse in line with the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah about the religious and even *political* displacement of the Jews by the Muslim community. As becomes clear below, Islahi gives Islam a political role (*islam mein mazhabi o siyasi qiyadat*, ibid, p. 324).

In the introduction to verses 58-70, Islahi reminds the reader to read these verses in the light of the subject of the Surah (*is raushni mein age ki ayat tilawat farmaiye*, ibid, p. 319). Verses 58-59 say:

Behold, God bids you to deliver all that you have been entrusted with unto those who are entitled thereto, and whenever you judge between people, to judge with justice. Verily, most excellent is what God exhorts you to do: verily, God is all-hearing, all-seeing!

O you who have attained to faith! Pay heed unto God, and pay heed unto the Apostle and unto those from among you who have been entrusted with authority; and if you are at variance over any matter, refer it unto God and the Apostle, if you (truly) believe in God and the Last Day. This is the best (for you), and best in the end.

Hence, in the light of the subject of the Surah, these verses are addressed to the Muslims (*musalmanon ko khitab kar ke*, ibid, p. 318) to tell them that the law of God has been taken away from the Jews and entrusted to the Muslims (*shari'ah ilahi ki ye amanat yahud se chin kar ab tumhare hawalah kiya ja rahi hai*, ibid). The Muslims are about to become a great nation (*ek mulk 'azim ke waris bhi banae ja rahe ho*, ibid). Furthermore, the Muslims are told to organize themselves into a nation (*musalman bahaisiyat ummat muslimah ke munazzam o mustahakam . . . goya in اساسat ki tafsil hai jin par islami nazam-i-hukumat mabni hai*, ibid). It is clear that Islahi reads these verses in the light of the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah.

As if to stress the point even further, Islahi lists the misdeeds of the Jews on account of which this responsibility has been taken away from them and entrusted to the Muslims who will perform their new duty, not like the Jews used to do, but in a just way, respecting the rights of all. For example, the Jews corrupted the Torah and created divisions based on their understanding of the law (*jo kitab in ki tahwil mein di gayi is mein unhone tahrif ki, jis shari'ah ka in ko hamil banaya gaya is mein unhone ikhtilaf paida kiya*, ibid. p. 322). For these reasons, the law is taken out of their care and entrusted to the leaders of the Muslim community, who will administer the law responsibly and justly (*musalmanon ko shari'ah aur iqtidar ki amanat supurd karne ke ba'd ijtimai haisiyat se sab se pahle jo hidayat hui wo ye hai ke tum jin huquq o faraiz ke zimmadar banae ja rahe ho in ko thik thik ada karna*, ibid).

It is the task of the Muslims to administer justice. As verse 135 says:

O you who have attained to faith! Be ever steadfast in upholding equity, bearing witness to the truth for the sake of God, even though it be against your own selves or your parents and kinsfolk. Whether the person concerned be rich or poor, God's claim takes precedence over (the claims of) either of them. Do not, then, follow your own desires, lest you swerve from justice: for if you distort (the truth), behold, God is indeed aware of all that you do!

If, instead of following God's invitation to uphold equity, the Muslims follow their own wishes and desires, they will destroy the system of equity, which God has called them to establish in the world (*is qist . . . jis ki da'wat aur shahadat par tum mamur kiye gaye ho*, ibid, p. 407). Islahi accuses the Jews of destroying this system of equity (*nizam-i-qist ko . . . bigarne aur maskh karne ki koshish ki jaye jaisa ke yahud ne kiya*, ibid).

Although Islam rejects slavery, Islamic society was developing in an environment that could not tolerate the immediate abolition of slavery (*ghulam aur laundiyan islam ke apne nizam mu'sharat ka koi juzu nahin hai balke ye chiz is waqt ke bain al aqwami halat . . . maujud thi*, ibid, pp. 279-280). Slaves would eventually be recognized as equal citizens in Islamic society (*wo biltadrij islami mu'share mein musawi darje ke rukn ban jayen*, ibid, p. 298). Islahi refers to the protection that Islamic *shari'ah* afforded to those who were living in the area of Islamic society and government (*islami shari'ah ke in tahaffuzzat se bhi mahrum tha jo darul islam mein ek musalman ko hasil hoti hain*, ibid, p. 361). Those outside this area (*darul harb*, ibid, p. 363; *darul kufr*, ibid, p. 365) could not enjoy the same privileges.

A Mandate to Govern

Islahi says that the formation of every social and political system demands obedience to authority. Islahi implies that Islam is such a system when he says that the focus of obedience in Islam is God, the Apostle and those in authority (*islam mein amr o ta'at ke markaz tin hain – allah, rasul, ululamr*, ibid, p. 324). Those in authority have the responsibility to refer all matters in the community to the Qur'an and the *Sunna* (*ummat ke arbab-i-hal o 'aqd . . . ki zimmadari hai*, ibid, p. 325). As verse 83 says, questions concerning peace and war should be referred to the Apostle or to those in authority:

And if any (secret) matter pertaining to peace or war comes within their ken, they spread it abroad – whereas, if they would but refer it unto the Apostle and unto those from among the believers who have

been entrusted with authority, such of them as are engaged in obtaining intelligence would indeed know (what to do with) it. After placing these matters in the right context, those in authority decide on the right course of action (*in ke mauqa' o mahal ka ta'yyan karte aur in ke bab mein sahih policy ikhtiyar karte*, ibid, p. 348). Islahi says that this verse indicates the significance of Islam as a political system (*is ayat se islam mein siyasi nizam ki ehmiyat o 'azmat wazeh hoti hai*, ibid).

The same point is developed from the words of verse 58:

Behold, God bids you to deliver all that you have been entrusted with unto those who are entitled thereto, and whenever you judge between people, to judge with justice. Verily, most excellent is what God exhorts you to do: verily, God is all-hearing, all-seeing.

This means that God has given power and responsibility to the Muslim community (*jin ko allah ta'ala apni zamin mein iqtidar bakhshita hai . . . tumhen kar raha hai*, ibid, p. 323). The following words from verse 59: "those from among you who have been entrusted with authority", confirm this conclusion and refer to those with insight or political power in an Islamic society (*ululamr se murad islami mu'share . . . ke halat ke lihaz se is ke masdaq arbab-i-'ilm o basirat bhi ho sakte hain aur arbab-i-iqtidar o siyasat bhi*, ibid).

In fact, in Islamic society and government, the scope of the authority of the Prophet (peace be upon him) extends even to the realm of political authority. As verse 65 says:

But nay, by thy Sustainer! They do not (really) believe unless they make thee (O Prophet) a judge of all on which they disagree among themselves, and then find in their hearts no bar to an acceptance of thy decision and give themselves up (to it) in utter self-surrender.

According to Islahi, a person of strong faith will accept the political authority of the Prophet (peace be upon him) as well as his religious authority (*jo log rasul ko mananey ka da'wa karte hain lekin is ke siyasi iqtidar ko taslim nahin karte*, ibid, pp. 328-329). Obedience to the Prophet and obedience to God are one and the same (*ham ma'ni ban jati hai*, ibid, p. 329).

Furthermore, Islamic society was not yet fully established when the laws contained in verses 15-18 were revealed (*ye ahkam . . . is daur se ta'lluq rakhate hain jab ke madina mein islami mu'sharah abhi puri tarah munazzam o mustahaqam nahin hua tha*, ibid, p. 262). Islahi calls them temporal laws

(*'arzi ahkam*, *ibid*). However, the different context of verses 60-63 required a change of approach. God gave guidance to the Muslims in these changed circumstances when Islam came to power and the political power of the Jews became weak (*jab islam ne taqat pakr li aur yahud ki siyasi taqat bilkul kamzaur ho gayi to musalmanon ko ye hidayat kar di gayi*, *ibid*, p. 327). Moreover, verses 66-70 describe the hypocrisy of the Jews and various tribes living in the vicinity of Medina who came under pressure to acknowledge the growing political power of Islam (*ye islam ki ubharti hui taqat ko dekh kar islam ke izhar par to majbur ho gaye they*, *ibid*, 330).

Conclusions

In the light of the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah Group about the establishing of an Islamic society (*islami mu'sharah aur . . . islami hukumat*, *ibid*, p. 237), Islahi finds a link between the last verse of Surah *Al 'Imran* and the first verse of Surah *An Nisa*. For this reason, he understands the meaning of the word *rabitu*, which occurs in verse 200 of Surah *Al 'Imran*, as an invitation to be firmly united in confronting the enemy (cf. *ibid*). Islahi finds the same idea in the opening words of Surah *An Nisa*:

O mankind! Be conscious of your Sustainer.

Islahi says that these words are an invitation to be united as a group (*apes mein jure rahna*, *ibid*). However, the opening phrase of this verse: "O mankind!" does not address a particular group in order to establish Islamic society but it has a more universal intent. Islahi gives the verse a particular interpretation that will bring out his theme ('*umud*).

Referring to the directive made in verse 102 about the correct method of prayer during time of war, Islahi says that modern conditions in the world do not permit a literal understanding of this directive. Besides, the Prophet (peace be upon him) is no longer among us. Consequently, the verse cannot be interpreted according to the context at the time of revelation. Islahi seems to be saying that the verse is obsolete or redundant. Consequently, he suggests that, in this situation, any form of prayer may be adopted. Islahi does not investigate the universal meaning of the verse.

A verse may either be addressed to the Prophet (peace be upon him) as the representative of the community (*bahaisiyat ummat ke wakil*, *ibid*, p. 378) or because those to whom a verse is speaking do not deserve to be addressed (*goya wo laiq khitaab nahin*, *ibid*). These principles of interpretation seem to be demanded by the context because Islahi says the general flow or direction of the text will indicate to whom the verses are addressed (*kalam ke tadriji irtiqa se un ka asli rukh bhi wazeh ho gaya hai ke khitaab fil haqiqat kin se hai*, *ibid*). Islahi has placed the onus on the reader to understand the meaning of the verse in its context. While this approach can free the text of the Qur'an from particular and relative interpretations, it also enables Islahi to read the Surah according to the way he wants to view the subject matter.

In Surah *Al Baqarah*, Islahi said that the true *din* of Abraham consisted of the attributes that God bestowed on him. His descendants could receive this

din, not because of their biological affinity with Abraham as members of his family or clan, but purely as attributes bestowed by God (*ye mansub tamam tar sifat par mubni hai, is ka koi ta'lluq bhi nasab aur khandan se nahin*, vol. 1, p. 318). Verse 124 of Surah *An Nisa* confirms this view by stressing that salvation is a matter of faith and good works rather than belonging to a certain group. Moreover, verse 125 asks:

And who could be of better faith than he who surrenders his whole being unto God and is a doer of good withal, and follows the creed of Abraham, who turned away from all that is false – seeing that God exalted Abraham with His love?

In contrast with this emphasis on personal faith and good works, however, Islahi says that *din* has now been bestowed on the Muslim community as a group. Even after stressing that the attributes of Abraham were the attributes bestowed on him by God, Islahi interprets the reference to “the House of Abraham” as a reference to a clan or family. As verse 54 says:

Do they, perchance, envy other people for what God has granted them out of His bounty? But then, We did grant revelation and wisdom unto the House of Abraham, and We did bestow on them a mighty dominion.

According to Islahi, the context indicates that the reference is to the Ishmaelites as a clan (*ahl-i-ibrahim agarche 'am hai lekin yahan murad bani isma'il hai. qarina is par dalil hai*, *ibid*, p. 315). After identifying the “people” in the above verse as the Muslims (*musalman hain*, *ibid*), Islahi concludes that the term “House of Abraham” refers to the Muslim community. In other words, the Muslim community inherits the attributes and the *din* of Abraham as a group. This conclusion contradicts Islahi’s earlier statement that *din* cannot be inherited because of clan, family or group considerations.

I find a basic contradiction in Islahi’s way of thinking in that, on the one hand, he stresses that *din* is a matter of surrender to God while, on the other hand, he discusses the historical development of *din* in terms of the response made by various groups or religious communities (*asl din un logon ka hai jo islam ka paio hain*, *ibid*, p. 384). For instance, verse 159 is addressed to the Jews and the Christians as a group (*wo donon grohon se bahaisiyat groh ke muta'lliq hain, bahaisiyat afrad ke nahin*, *ibid*, p. 422). Moreover, verse 136 addresses the Muslims as a group (*musalmanon min hais al jama't mukhatab hai*, *ibid*, p. 408). Islahi refers to groups of “believers” and “Muslims” – using these terms interchangeably without investigating the impact this has on the way the Surah is understood. The Muslims are

(*'umud*) of the Surah concerning the development of an Islamic society and government. In addition, Islahi sees the blessings promised by God in chapter 22 of the Book of Genesis being fulfilled literally in the Muslim community (*allah ta'ala in ko ek 'azim ummat banaega*, *ibid*, p. 316). Islahi arrives at all these conclusions by interpreting the Surah according to his own personal preferences.

For example, Islahi says the Jews were jealous of the “mighty sovereignty” (*'azim sultanant*, *ibid*) that God was giving to the Muslims. The parable of Cain and Abel in Surah *Al Maidah* reflects the jealousy that the Jews had for the Muslims because of the blessings the latter were receiving (*yahud ne is ummat ke ma'amle mein bilkul wohi ravish ikhtiyar ki jo qabil ne habil ke ma'amle mein ikhtiyar ki*, *ibid*, p. 459). However, the story of Cain and Abel is about the ethical principle of murder. It has nothing to do with the Jews' jealousy of the Muslims. Islahi takes the story out of context and uses it for his own purposes.

Finally, Islahi describes Islam as a political system (*siyasi nazam*, *ibid*, p. 348). Verse 59 says that only those in authority (*arbab-i-iqtidar o siyasat*, *ibid*, p. 323) should exercise the power and responsibility that exists in Islamic society. Moreover, the scope of the authority of the Prophet (peace be upon him) extends into the area of politics (*is ke siyasi iqtidar*, *ibid*, pp. 328-329). Islam came to power when the Jews had become weak (*jah islam ne taqat pakr li aur yahud ki siyasi taqat bilkul kamzor ho gai*, *ibid*, p.327). Islahi's analysis of the political rise to power of the Muslims has no bearing on the contemporary situation in the world today.

Surah Al Maidah

Introduction

1. The Theme of the Surah

This Surah is the last of Surah Group One. In this Surah, God makes a covenant with the Muslim community (*ummat muslimah se . . . ahd o paiman liya hai*, vol. 2, p. 443) in order that they might keep the last and perfect law (*akhri aur kamil shari'ah*, *ibid*). Previously, this covenant had been made with the People of the Book but they did not prove worthy of the trust placed in them, as has become clear in earlier Surahs. For this reason, the People of the Book were relieved of their mandate (*ma'zul kiye gaye*, *ibid*) and God entrusted the Muslims with the last and perfect law. In this Surah, God makes a covenant with the Muslims so that, instead of disobeying the law of God (*khuda ki shari'ah ke ma'mle mein khain aur ghaddar na ban jana*, *ibid*), they might adhere to it faithfully. The Muslims were to keep the law themselves and to make an effort to make others obey it as well. They were to stand up for the truth by enduring every trial and by facing every danger.

2. A few Significant Points

Firstly, the laws and commandments presented in the Surah are related to the time when the mission of Islam had reached a peak and was experiencing an abundance of divine blessings (*da'wat-i-islami ke is daur se ta'lluq rakhne wale hain jab takmil-i-din aur itmam-i-ni'amat-i-ilahi ka marhala samne a cuka tha*, *ibid*). The laws revealed to the Muslim community were very suitable laws (*mauzu ahkam*, *ibid*) and so the covenant was made on the basis of the whole *shari'ah* (*goya puri shari'ah par ahd o paiman ho gaya*, *ibid*).

Secondly, the aspect of trial and testing is uppermost in these laws. Earlier religious communities had received such laws but fell into disgrace and became subject to God's anger. At the time the new covenant was made, the Muslim community was aware of the possibility that it could make the same mistakes as these earlier communities had made. Since the Muslim community knew of the danger zones, there was hope that it would not make similar mistakes (*cf. ibid*).

Thirdly, the Surah relates in detail the history of the way the Jews and the Christians broke the covenant (*naqz-i-ahd ki tarikh*, ibid) including the reasons and the motivations behind it. The purpose of this historical narrative is to provide a lesson for the Muslim community (cf. ibid, p. 444).

Fourthly, the Surah exposes secret aspects of private and social life in order to prevent Satan and his agents from spreading terror within the community. If these social evils (*fitne*, ibid) are not checked in time, they can destroy the whole *shari'ah*.

Fifthly, the principles and ordinances (*usul o zawabit*, ibid) that are needed to establish the divine covenant (*jin ka ihtimam ahd ilahi par qaim o ustawar rahne ke liye zaruri hai*, ibid) are clarified in full.

Keeping these five points in mind, a reader genuinely searching for the truth (*jo talib-i-haq tadabbur ke sath is surah ki tilawat karega*, ibid) will have no difficulty in understanding the coherence (*mauzu' aur is ke nizam*, ibid) of the Surah. In fact, these few points are sufficient to obtain a grasp of the coherence of the Surah (*surah ke nizam ko samajhne ke liye ye isharah bhi kafi hain*, ibid).

The Perfect Religion

Islahi stresses that the Surah was revealed at the time when the laws and guidance of Islam were reaching their peak (*surah tamam tar islam ke takmili daur ke ahkam o hidayat par mustamil hai*, ibid, p. 457). The time had come for a clearer demarcation between the unbelievers and the Muslims (*donon mein mukamal mu'sharati inqata' ka 'elan ho gaya*, ibid, pp. 457-458). This is the background for the statement in verse 3:

Today, those who are bent on denying the truth have lost all hope of (your ever forsaking) your religion: do not, then, hold them in awe, but stand in awe of Me!

Islahi explains that the word *al yauma*, which occurs repeatedly in verse 3 and in verse 5, refers to the time of revelation (*wo zamana hai jis mein ye ayaten nazil hui hain*, ibid, p. 457). The time has now come do away with food restrictions for the Muslims (*ab wo tamam pabandiyan khatam ho gayi*, ibid, p. 464). Moreover, the Muslims have become a power that cannot be annihilated (*musalman ek na qabl-i-shikast taqat ban chukey they*, ibid, p.465).

The first eleven verses of the Surah describe the time during which the Muslim community was receiving many blessings (*is ummat par itmam-i-ni'mat hai*, ibid, p. 466). As verse 7 says:

And (always) remember the blessings which God has bestowed upon you, and the solemn pledge by which He bound you to himself when you said, "We have heard, and we pay heed." Hence, remain conscious of God: verily, God has full knowledge of what is in the hearts (of men).

It was a time when God revealed the perfect laws and ordinances to the Muslim community to be their religion, according to the words of verse 3:

Today have I perfected your religious law for you, and have bestowed upon you the full measure of My blessings, and willed that self-surrender unto Me shall be your religion.

These verses indicate that the Surah was revealed during the time that God bestowed the perfect law and religion upon the Muslim community (*ab allah ka din bhi takmil ki had ko pahuncha aur tumhari shari'ah bhi itmam ki manzil ko pahunchi aur islam ko khuda ne tumhare liye din ki haisiyat se pasind farmaya*, ibid, p. 459). The *din* that the disciples of Jesus received was the *din* of *islam*, not that of Christianity (*hawariyin ne jis din ko qabul kiya wo nasraniyat o majusiyat nahin balke islam hai*, ibid, p. 608). Clearly, this could not be the social and political form of Islam that developed later.

The Theme of the Surah

Islahi finds the theme of the Surah expressed in the opening verses of the Surah. The last words of verse 2 say:

Do not help one another in furthering evil and enmity; and remain conscious of God: for, behold, God is severe in retribution!

These words express a warning for the Muslim community to observe their covenant with God in all circumstances for God has entrusted them with this special mandate (*khuda ne tum ko apne ahd o misaq se dunya ki imamat ki sarfarazi bakhshi hai*, ibid, p. 456). In contrast, the last part of verse 5 is an allusion to the People of the Book:

But as for him who rejects belief (in God) – in vain will be all his works: for in the life to come he shall be among the lost.

Islahi says that the People of the Book have excluded themselves from the blessings that God intended to give the whole world through the instrumentality of the Muslim community (*is ummat ke zariy'ah se tamam dunya ke age bachana chaha tha . . . ahl kitab . . . is se faidah nahin utaya to*

ye in ki apni bad qismati hai, ibid, 464). God warns the Muslims not to be like the Jews who neglected their covenant with God (*yahud ki tarah is ko bhul na jana balke is ko hamesha yad rakhna*, ibid, p. 470).

According to Islahi, verse 8 develops the theme further by defining more clearly the mandate given to the Muslim community:

O you who have attained to faith! Be ever steadfast in your devotion to God, bearing witness to the truth in all equity; and never let hatred of anyone lead you into the sin of deviating from justice. Be just: this is closest to being God-conscious. And remain conscious of God: verily, God is aware of all that you do.

The verse expresses the responsibilities given to the Muslim community to uphold justice (*musalmanon par bahaisiyat ummat muslimah ye zimmadari hai ke wo is haq o 'adl ke 'alm hardar banen jo is akhri shari'ah ki shakl mein in ko 'ata hua hai*, ibid, p. 471). Simply out of hostility for the Muslims, the Jews ruined their covenant with God (*yahud ne mahz bani isma'il aur musalmanon ki dushmani mein is tamam ahd o paiman ko khak mein mila dia*, ibid). Islahi repeats that, according to verses 9-10, God has given the responsibility for the covenant to the Muslims (*allah ta'ala ne ham par is misaq ki zimmadari dali hai*, ibid). Furthermore, the purpose of the describing the covenant of the children of Israel in verses 12-14 is to inform the Muslims of the similarities between the pledge that the Israelites made with the pledge that the Muslims have also made (*maqsud is se musalmanon mutanba karna hai ke ab tum se jo ahd liya ja raha hai ye bhi isi nau'yat ka ahd hai*, ibid, p. 473). Verse 12 says:

And, indeed, God accepted a (similar) solemn pledge from the children of Israel.⁴³

The narrative about Cain and Abel, the two sons of Adam, further illustrates the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah. Islahi says the narrative is a parable (*misal*, ibid, p. 495) about the relationship between the Jews and the Muslims. The parable begins in verse 27:

And convey unto them, setting forth the truth, the story of the two sons of Adam – how each offered a sacrifice, and it was accepted from one of them whereas it was not accepted from the other

Islahi says the verse is directed to the Jews because they treated the Muslims in precisely the same way that Cain treated Abel. As Cain became jealous of

⁴³ In his remark on this verse, Asad says: "The interpolation of 'similar' is justified by the obvious reference to verse 7 above." Muhammad Asad (1980), p. 143, footnote 21. The point is that verse 7 mentions a "pledge" with reference to the Muslim community. I have quoted it on page 2 (above).

Abel, the Jews became jealous of the Muslims when they saw how God bestowed blessings upon them (*isi tarah jahud ne . . . haisad ke janun mein aise bukhlaye*, ibid). Further, the Jews wrought havoc on earth just as Cain did (*bani israil ne . . . barabar qabil ki sunnat bad ki pairwi mein khuda ki zamin mein fasad o khunrezi barpa kiye ja rahe hain*, ibid, p. 501). According to Islahi, verse 32 does not only reveal the law of retribution but refers to the corruption that the Jews brought to the world (*yahan maqsud hukm qasas ki tarikh bayan karna nahin hai balke ye wazeh karna hai ke bani israil . . . barabar khuda ki zamin mein fasad barpa kiye chale ja rahe hain*, ibid, p. 503). He says that the Quraysh were in cohorts with the Jews and he describes their evildoing in detail (cf. ibid, p. 505). The Jews did all this in spite of the abundant guidance they received through the Prophets sent to them (*itimam hujjat*, ibid, p. 504).

In this situation, verse 42 tells the Prophet to judge between them with equity:

Hence, if they come to thee (for judgment), thou mayest either judge between them or leave them alone: for, if thou leave them alone, they cannot harm thee in any way. But if thou dost judge, judge between them with equity: verily, God knows those who act equitably.

Islahi says that God is telling the whole Muslim community through the Prophet that they have been entrusted with the task of judging justly (*ye paighambar salla allahu alayhi wa sallam aur ap ke waste se puri ummat se goya ahd liya gaya hai ke faislah . . . qanun 'adl o qist ke mutabiq ho*, ibid, p. 526). In order to convey this trust to the Muslim community, God deposed earlier communities (*isi ki khatir allah ne pichhli ummaton ko ma'zul kar ke is ummat ko barpa kiya hai*, ibid). According to verses 44-45, the main purpose of the former Scriptures was to convey this task to earlier communities, (*taurat se muta'lliq in par kiya zimmadariyan 'aid thiy*, ibid, p. 507) but their leaders did not take their responsibility seriously (cf. ibid, pp. 507-508).

Islahi quotes extensively from the Book of Numbers and from the Book for Genesis⁴⁴ since the Qur'an provides only a summary (*quran ne . . . sirf khulasah dia hai*, ibid, p. 488). Islahi says that the main purpose of the historical narratives in the former Scriptures was not simply to provide an account of history but to provide the Muslims with a lesson (*naqz-i-ahd ki ye tarikh musalmanon ko mahz mazi ki ek sarguzasht ki haisiyat se nahin sunai*

⁴⁴ Cf. ibid, pp. 487, 490, 491, 492 and 496.

ja rahi hai balke is liye sunai ja rahi hai ke musalman is se sabaq len, ibid, p. 478) and to warn the Muslims that their fate will be the same as the Jews and Christians if they neglect their covenant with God (cf. ibid).

However, Islahi's commentary goes further than to discuss the warning the Surah gives to the Muslims. Islahi develops the argument that the covenant was transferred from the Jewish community to the Muslim community (*nabi ummi aur in ki ummat ko muntaqil hua*, ibid, p. 458). He states that God bestowed the covenant upon the Muslim community (*allah ta'ala ne ham par is misaq ki zimmadari dali hai*, ibid, p. 471) and that the Jews excluded themselves from all the blessings of God (*apne ap ko in tamam rahmaton aur barkaton se mahrum kar liya*, ibid, p. 464). Islahi even says that God deposed earlier communities (*allah ne pichhli ummaton ko ma'zul kar ke*, ibid, p. 526). This is to read the Surah according to the way the theme ('*umud*') was explained at the beginning (*jo . . . is surah ki tilawat karega wo is ke mauzu' aur is ke nizam ke samajhne mein . . . koi uljhan nahin mahsus karega*, ibid, p. 444).

A Mandate to Govern

We noted above that the Surah was revealed when the Muslims had become strong (*musalman ek na qabl-i-shikast taqat ban chukey they*, ibid, p. 465). In fact, Islahi makes it clear that the Muslims had obtained political power (*ye is daur ki surat hai jab musalman ek siyasi quwwat ban chuki thi*, ibid, p. 472), though not complete and unrivalled power (*musalman agarche ek siyasi taqat ban chuke they lekin abhi in ko makamal iqtidar hasil nahin hua tha*, ibid, p. 544). Islahi limits his analysis to the time of revelation (*jis zamane mein ye ayat nazil hui hai, is zamane tak*, ibid). Other verses (for example, verses 52-53) deal with the future of Islam (*islam ki . . . apne mustaqbil ke taraf se*, ibid, p. 545).

In this situation, verses 33-34 provide laws to deal with the external enemies of Islam (*jang o jihad ke ahkam*, ibid, p. 505). Furthermore, Islamic punishments were implemented to deal with internal enemies (*islami hukumat ke in andrauni dushmanon ki sarkaubi ke liye*, ibid). Islamic government has the authority to decide on these matters (*hukumat in mein se jo iqdam bhi munasib samjhe, kar sakti hai*, ibid, p. 506). Islahi makes dismissive remarks about modern approaches to punishment (*maujuda zamane mein jurm aur mujrimin ke liye falsafah ke nam se . . . islam is qism ke mahmul nazriyat ke hauslah afzai nahin karta*, ibid, p. 507) and seems to

suggest a return to those punishments outlined in verse 33 and verse 38 (*suli aur phansi ke wo tariqe bhi ikhtiyar kiye ja sakte jo ziyadah draunak aur ziyadah e'brat angezi hon*, ibid, p. 506).

However, Islahi adds that Islamic punishments can be enforced only in an Islamic society (*saza ke nifaz ke liye darul islam hona bhi shart hai*, ibid, p. 512) since these punishments are part of an Islamic system (*ye ahkam o hadud ek majmu'i nizam ka juzu hain*, ibid). The fact that these laws were revealed at a time when Islam was in power proves that these laws cannot be separated from such an Islamic environment (*in ahkam ka zamana nuzul khud is bat ka sabut hai ke in ke nifaz ke liye darul islam shart hai. chunanche allah ta'ala ne ye ahkam nazil hi is waqt farmaye jab darul islam 'amlan qaim ho chuka*, ibid). Clearly, Islahi establishes a strong link between the laws about punishment with the period in which they were revealed. Does he imply that these laws could even change or develop since the period in which they were revealed no longer exists?

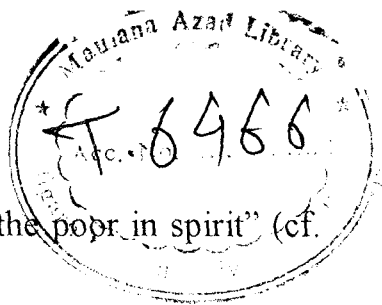
A significant indication of Islahi's approach emerges from his discussion of the second part of verse 48:

Unto every one of you have We appointed a (different) law and way of life. And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community: but (He willed it otherwise) in order to test you by means of what He has vouchsafed unto you. Vie, then, with one another in doing good works! Unto God you all must return; and then He will make you truly understand all that on which you were wont to differ.

Instead of understanding these lines as an invitation to tolerance and harmony between Muslims and Christians (*ahl kitab ke sath izhar rawadari ke liye nahin*, ibid, p. 534), Islahi says these words express displeasure with the customs of the People of the Book (*in ke riwayat se izhar bizari*, ibid). Islahi has a similar approach to the second part of verse 82, which seems to affirm a profound sympathy on the part of Christians:

Thou wilt surely find that, of all people, they who say, "Behold, we are Christians," come closest to feeling affection for those who believe (in this divine writ): this is so because there are priests and monks among them, and because these are not given to arrogance.

However, Islahi cannot identify the "Christians" that the verse refers to. He finds fault with the modern church system (*maujuda kalisai nizam*, ibid, p. 574) and fails to find the humility the verse describes. Finally, he suggests there may be a connection between the Christians referred to in this verse



with the verse in the New Testament that speaks of "the poor in spirit" (cf. *ibid*).

The words *minhaj* and *shari'ah* refer to the ways and practices that differ in each of the three groups: the Jews, the Christians and the Muslims (cf. *ibid*). Islahi says that the truths of *din* remain unchanged (*yahan tak din ke haqiq ka ta'lluq hai wo hamesha se ghair mutaghayyar hain*, *ibid*, p. 535) whereas the *shari'ah* or *minhaj* is different in each community (*allah ne har ummat ke liye shari'ah aur minhaj alag alag bane hain*, *ibid*, p. 536). The Jews' attachment to their customs and habits (*ye apne pichhle rasum o qaiyud mein griftar hain*, *ibid*), led them to choose the way of unbelief (*kufr ki rah mein sabaqat kar rahe hain*, *ibid*). On the basis of verses 49-50, Islahi argues that any law opposed to God's law leads to darkness (*jo khuda ke uthare hue qanun ke khilaf hai wo jahiliyat ka qanun hai*, *ibid*, p. 537). However, Islahi does not develop the valid distinction between *din*, *minhaj* and *shari'ah*, a distinction that could lead to greater understanding and respect among the different religious communities.

In conclusion, it seems to me that the special responsibility God gives to the Muslims to judge with equity (*qayam bilqist aur shahadat 'alannas ke jis mansub par allah ta'ala ne musalmanon ko mamur farmaya hai*, *ibid*, p. 466) need not exclude the Jews from God's blessings. In other words, rather than highlighting the political mandate to govern, as Islahi does, it may be more important to stress the moral and ethical responsibility that God bestows on the Muslims. Towards the end of his discussion of this Surah, Islahi describes its main theme in words that reflect an emphasis on justice and moral responsibility (*akhir mein qayam 'adl o qist aur shahadat-i-haq ki is 'azim zimmadari . . . jo is surah mein markazi mazmun ki haisiyat rakhti hai*, *ibid*, p. 576).⁴⁵

Finally, Islahi's analysis could lead the Muslim community to consider itself as the beloved or chosen ones of God just as earlier communities had considered themselves the beloved children of God - in the words of verse 18:

And (both) the Jews and the Christians say, "We are God's children, and His beloved ones".

⁴⁵ Islahi also says that God loves those who uphold justice as a way of life (*is ko pasind in logon ki jid o jahd hai jo is dunya mein nizam-i-haq o 'adl ke 'almbardar hai*, *ibid*, p. 555).

Islahi seems to encourage the Muslims to think this way when he describes them as the special “party” of God that will be victorious in the end (*wo allah ki parti banenge aur yahi parti bilakhir ghalib hogi*, *ibid*, p. 537) while claiming to reject all kinds of group prejudice (*grohi fakhr o gharur ka abtal*, *ibid*, p. 565).

Conclusions

Islahi says the Surah was revealed at the time when Islamic society had reached a highpoint because of the blessings it was receiving from God (*jab takmil-i-din aur itmam-i-ni'amat-i-ilahi ka marhala samne a cuka tha*, ibid, p. 443).⁴⁶ The Muslims had become a power that could not be annihilated (*musalman ek na qabl-i-shakast taqat ban chuke they*, ibid, p. 465) and Islam had even become a political power (*jab musalman ek siyasi quwwat ban cuki thiy*, ibid, p. 472). It was in this situation that verse 3 of the Surah pronounced *islam* as the perfect *din*. Islahi seems to make no distinction between *islam* as surrender to God and the Islamic laws concerning *jang*, *jihad* and the Islamic punishments that were being implemented by those who had authority in the Islamic government (*islami hukumat*, ibid, pp. 505-506) at that time. As a result, Islahi fails to identify the universal dimension of the verses related to the emergence of Islamic society in Medina. His understanding of Islam and of Islamic society remains tied to its historical manifestation in Medina.

Islahi says that the *din*, which the disciples of Jesus received was the *din* of *islam*, not that of Christianity (*hawariyin ne jis din ko qabul kiya wo nasraniyat o majusiyat nahin balke islam hai*, ibid, p. 608). Clearly, the *din* of the disciples of Jesus could not have been the social and political form of Islam that developed centuries after the Prophet Jesus was living. Hence, *din* should not be identified with Islam but should be understood as the common possession of those people among the Jews, the Christians and the Muslims who surrender themselves to God after the example of the Prophet Abraham.

It is remarkable that Islahi interprets verse 48 and verse 82 of this Surah as expressions of displeasure with the People of the Book (*in ke riwayat se izhar bizari*, ibid, p. 534) whereas these verses could very well be understood as invitations to respect and to promote harmony among religious communities. However, instead of emphasizing the many things that these religious communities have in common, Islahi understands the terms *din*, *minhaj* and *shari'ah* as highlighting the differences that exist among them.

⁴⁶ In fact, only some verses of the Surah were revealed at the end of the Prophet's life. Verses about cattle slaughter etc. were revealed much earlier.

Furthermore, Islahi ties Islamic laws to the period in which they were revealed (*in ahkam ka zamana nuzul*, *ibid*, p. 512) and to the Islamic environment in which they were first implemented (*dar al islam shart hai*, *ibid*). Since the period in which these laws were revealed no longer exists, the logical conclusion would be that these laws no longer apply. However, Islahi seems to imply that these laws are prescribed for every Islamic society. He does not consider the need for their adaptation to changed circumstances.⁴⁷

To say, as Islahi does, that God bestowed the covenant on the Muslim community (*allah ta'ala ne ham par is misaq ki zimmadari dali hai*, *ibid*, p. 471) and that God deposed earlier communities (*allah ne pichhle ummaton ko ma'zul kar ke*, *ibid*, p. 526) is to read the Surah according to the way the theme ('*umud*) was presented at the beginning of the discussion (*jo . . . is surah ki tilawat karega wo is ke mauzu' aur is ke nizam ke samajhne mein . . . koi uljhan nahin mahsus karega*, *ibid*, p. 444). These repeated references to the deposition of the Jews and the new mandate entrusted to the Muslim community illustrate Islahi's desire to prove that this particular theme runs throughout the Surah.

The role that Islahi outlines for the Muslim community is one that could lead the Muslims to consider themselves as the beloved or chosen ones of God just as earlier communities had considered themselves the beloved children of God - in the words of verse 18:

And (both) the Jews and the Christians say, "We are God's children, and His beloved ones".

Islahi seems to encourage the Muslims to think this way when he describes them as the special "party" of God that will be victorious in the end (*wo allah ki parti banenge aur yahi parti bilakhir ghalib hogi*, *ibid*, p. 537) while, at the same time, claiming to reject all kinds of group prejudice (*grohi fakhr o ghurur ka ibtal*, *ibid*, p. 565)

⁴⁷ Esack says that the punishments described in the Qur'an belong to the specific culture and society at the time of revelation and should be adapted in different circumstances. He writes: "The Islamic penal system was applicable to a certain kind of society where retribution for various crimes often lasted for generations. 'An eye for an eye' is not a prescription but a limitation. Thus the Qur'an says 'And in *qisas* (just retribution) there is life for you, O people of understanding' (Q. 2.170). In other words, the kind of endless retribution exacted upon generations had to be terminated. This is one of the reasons that the punishments defined in the Qur'an are called *hudud* Allah (the limits of Allah). If the death penalty were a divine prescription, then the question of blood money would not have arisen. Given the extent of socio-economic disparity which exists today, it is evident that any insistence on the death penalty - even in majority Muslim states - means that only the wealthy will be allowed to get away. Esack (2000), p. 183. Cf. also Saeed (2006), p. 136.

It seems to me that the special responsibility God gives to the Muslims to judge with equity (*qayam bilqist aur shahadat 'alannas ke jis mansub par allah ta'ala ne musalmanon ko mamur farmaya hai*, *ibid*, p. 466) need not exclude the Jews from God's blessings. Consequently, rather than highlighting the political mandate to govern, as Islahi does, it may be more important to stress the moral and ethical responsibility that God bestows on the Muslim community. In fact, towards the end of his discussion of this Surah, Islahi describes its main theme in words that reflect an emphasis on justice and moral responsibility (*akhr mein qayam 'adl o qist aur shahadat-i-haq ki is 'azim zimmadari . . . jo is surah mein markazi mazmun ki haisiyat rakhti hai*, *ibid*, p. 576).⁴⁸ An emphasis in this direction would only increase the esteem in which the Muslim community is regarded throughout the world.

⁴⁸ Earlier in the discussion, Islahi had also said that God loves those who uphold justice as a way of life (*is ko pasind in logon ki jid o jahd hai jo is dunya mein nizam-i-haq o 'adl ke 'almbardar hai*, *ibid*, p. 555).

Introduction to Surah Group Two

This Surah Group consists of four Surahs: *Al An'am*, *Al A'raf*, *Al Anfal* and *At Taubah*. The first two Surahs of this Surah Group are addressed to the people of Mecca. Surah *Al An'am* deals with the three basic elements of religion: unity of God, the Last Day and Prophethood and expounds the original religion of Abraham (*asl din-i-ibrahimi*, vol. 3, p. 9). This Surah resorts to arguments drawn from reason and nature and the evidence available from human experience and from the environment (*binæ istadlal tamam tar 'aql o fitrat aur afaq o anfus ke shawahid*, *ibid*). It also draws on material generally accepted by the Arabs (*musallamat*, *ibid*).

Surah *Al A'raf* is focused on the communication of a warning. The Quraysh are informed about the demands that the appearance of a Prophet makes on a nation - the principles and laws that God associates with such an event and the consequences a nation must face if it persists in rejecting its Prophet. The Surah also provides illustrations taken from history to show what a nation should expect if it refuses to budge from its stance of rejection.

In Surah *Al Anfal*, the Muslims are told to put their shortcomings aside (*kamzauriyan dur kar ke*, *ibid*), to unite in their obedience to God and the Messenger and to struggle against the Quraysh (*kuffar-i-quraysh se jihad par*, *ibid*). The Quraysh are informed that they have no right to custodianship of the Inviolable House of Worship (*bait allah par qabiz rahne ka koi haq nahin hai*, *ibid*) since the Muslims have inherited this right (*warasat-i-ibrahimi ke haq dar musalman hain*, *ibid*). The Muslims are informed that the time has come for the Quraysh to receive humiliating punishment in this world and in the next.

In Surah *At Taubah*, the Quraysh receive an ultimatum. There are only two possibilities left for them: either to accept Islam or be killed (*islam ya talwar*, *ibid*). The Muslims are told to sever all links with the Quraysh and a strong warning is issued to those Muslims who continue to maintain secret contacts with them. Muslims who continue to engage in relations with the Quraysh have only two options left: either to become genuine Muslims by getting rid of all hypocrisy (*nifaq ki tamam alaishon se pak kar ke*, *ibid*) or to face the consequences that all enemies of God and the Prophet must face (*allah o rasul ke in dushmanon ka hone wala hai*, *ibid*).

In light of the above and with the help of sustained reflection, the profound and subtle interconnectedness (*nihayat gahri hakimana tartib*, ibid, p. 10) of these four Surahs will begin to become clear. In Surah *Al An'am*, the Quraysh are presented with complete evidence concerning the message of God (*itmam-i-hujjat*, ibid). In Surah *Al A'raf*, they receive a severe warning. In Surah *Al Anfal*, the Muslims receive guidance for the struggle (*jihad*, ibid) with the Quraysh and become aware that God has deposed the Quraysh from their position of custodianship (*tauliyat*, ibid) of the Inviolable House of Worship. In Surah *At Taubah*, the Quraysh receive an ultimatum and the hypocrites are given their last warning.

The People of the Book were the ones addressed in Surah Group One and the Quraysh were addressed only indirectly (*zimanan*, ibid). In contrast, this Surah Group is primarily concerned with the Quraysh and the People of the Book are addressed only indirectly. The change in those addressed by this Surah Group involves a change in the style or manner of presenting the arguments (*mawad istadlal . . . bunyadi farq hai*, ibid). Consequently, in this Surah Group, the arguments are all based on reason and nature and on the evidence available in human experience and in the environment (*'aql o fitrat aur afaq o anfus ke shawahid se hai*, ibid) whereas the first Surah Group drew on material generally known and accepted by the People of the Book (*sari chizen istadlal ke taur par ist'emal hui hain jin ko ahl kitab mante they*, ibid).

In the first Surah Group, the custodianship of religion was taken from the People of the Book (*amanat ke mansub se ma'zul kiya gaya hai*, ibid) and entrusted to the Muslims. In this Surah Group, the custodianship of the Inviolable House of Worship is taken from the Quraysh (*bait allah ki tauliyat se ma'zul kiya gaya*, ibid) and entrusted to the Muslim community (*ummat-i-muslimah ke supurd ki gayi hai*, ibid).

Surah Al An'am

Introduction

This Surah is addressed to the Quraysh. After presenting the arguments clearly, the Surah offers an invitation to the Quraysh to believe in the unity of God and the Last Day and to accept the Prophethood of Muhammad (peace be upon him). If the Quraysh refuse to accept the Prophet, the Surah threatens them with the same fate of those nations that did not accept the Prophet sent to them.

Since the Arabs were the descendants of Abraham, they claimed that the religion they had adopted was the religion they had inherited from Abraham. For this reason, the message of Abraham to his people is brought out clearly in this Surah (*is hujjat . . . jo hazrat ibrahim ne apni qaum ke samne pesh ki*, vol. 3, p. 10) so that the Quraysh might be better informed about the true community of Abraham (*ke asl millet-i-ibrahim kiya hai*, *ibid*) and so that they may find out whether it is the Prophet and his followers or the Quraysh who are the authentic members of this community (*haqiqi paio*, *ibid*). The Surah should be read with this theme in mind (*surah ke is 'umud ko pesh nazar rakhte hue*, *ibid*).

Din as the Religion of Abraham

Islahi finds an answer to the question about the true community of Abraham (*asl millet-i-ibrahimi*) in verses 74-90, which affirm that all the Prophets professed monotheism (*sab ka din wohi din tauhid tha*, *ibid*, p. 100). Monotheism was thus the religion (*din*) of all the Prophets (*yahi din tamam anbiya ka mushtarak din hai*, *ibid*), a result of God's gracious guidance in the straight path (*din-i-tauhid aur isi sirat mushtaqim ki*, *ibid*, p. 101). In the midst of this exposition, however, Islahi introduces another term, saying that all these Prophets followed *islam* (*tauhid aur islam hi ke da'i they*, *ibid*).

Islahi claims that verse 89, which belongs to this group of verses regarding the *din* of all the Prophets, is already referring to the future *community of Muslims* who will enter *islam*. In the words of verse 89:

It was to them that We vouchsafed revelation, and sound judgment, and Prophethood.

And now, although the unbelievers may choose to deny these truths,
(know that)

We have entrusted them to people who will never refuse to
acknowledge them.

Islahi says that the word “people” in this verse refers to the present and future Muslims (*jo is waqt tak dakhil-i-islam ho chuki thi aur wo log bhi hain jin ke liye ba'd mein is ke hamilin mein dakhil hona muqaddar tha*, ibid, p. 103). Although Islahi understands this verse to be a prophecy of the growth of the future community (*mustaqbil mein ummat ki kasrat ki peshangoi*, ibid), he returns to the concept of monotheism (*din*) in verse 90, which is simply an invitation to *din* (*ye allah ke din ki da'wat hai*, ibid):

Follow, then, their guidance, (and) say: “No reward do I ask of you
for this (truth): behold, it is but an admonition unto all mankind!”

In the course of history, however, this “invitation to *din*” has been misinterpreted in ways that have led people astray. So the last verse of this group of verses (verse 91) contains the noun *kitab*, which according to Islahi, refers to the Qur'an:

Behold, it is but an admonition unto all mankind.

In short, the subject matter of this Surah seems to be the interconnected roles of *din*, *islam* and the Qur'an in the communication of *truth*, the original religion of Abraham (*asal millet ibrahim ki wazahat*, ibid, p. 147), which is the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah.

Throughout this Surah, Islahi highlights the interaction of *din* and Islam. For instance, verse 121 says:

Hence, eat not of that over which God's name has not been pronounced.

Islahi describes the polemical context of the propaganda that was coming from those who were opposing the Muslims and who were accusing them of changing the *din* of their forefathers (*unhone apne 'awam ke jazbat musalmanon ke khilaf barkane ke liye ye propaganda sharu' kiya hoga ke ye lo ye naye din wale to ham ko aur hamare bap dada sab ko haram khaur qarar dete hain*, ibid, p. 157). By setting the discussion in such a polemical context, Islahi can explain the term *din* in terms of the Muslim community of that period. Islahi also makes an effort to associate the prescriptions listed in verse 151 with the *faith of Abraham* rather than directly with *Islam* (*ye baten hain jin ki allah ne millet-i-ibrahim mein hidayat firmai thi*, ibid, p. 201). Moreover, he says verse 151 is addressed to the new religion of Abraham (*ab main tumein az sar-i-nau millet-i-ibrahim ke ye ahkam is liye*

suna raha hun, ibid, p. 202). This religion is basically one and undivided (*asl din bunyadi taur par ek hi hai*, ibid, p. 205).

Furthermore, Islahi sees verse 159 as a reference to the community of Abraham (*millet ibrahim*), which developed into two branches:

Verily, as for those who have broken the unity of their faith and have become sects – thou hast nothing to do with them.

Each branch – the Israelite and the Ishmaelite – has wandered far from the *din* that came from God (cf. ibid, p. 209) by promoting sectarianism (*tafriqa paida kiya aur mukhtalif grohon mein bat gaye*, ibid). Islahi says that the Qur'an admonishes Jews and Christians as well as those among the Arabs who practiced unbelief (*shirk*) and he disregards the possibility that the verse may actually be directed to the Muslims themselves as a separate community. Instead, Islahi says that Islam was based on the religion of Abraham (*millet-i-ibrahim*) in contrast to Judaism and Christianity (*islam . . . yahudiyat o nasraniyat ke bar'ks, millet-i-ibrahim par mabni hai*, ibid, p. 191). But the fact that Islam was based on *millet-i-ibrahim* cannot guarantee the total absence of sectarianism in the Muslim community. The message of the Qur'an is meant for all, including the Muslims.

In fact, Islahi links the community of Abraham (*millet-i-ibrahim*) with *islam* itself, saying that the Qur'an uses the phrase *dinan qiyaman* (which Asad translates as "ever-true faith") for both the community of Abraham as well as for the way of Islam (*millet ibrahim aur millet islam ke liye ist'emal hua hai*, ibid, p. 210). Furthermore, Islahi seems to make no distinction between the religion of *islam* that the Prophet (peace be upon him) came to announce (and which he himself put into practice) and the religion of Islam practiced by subsequent generations of believers. In his own life, the Prophet (peace be upon him) was an example of that total surrender to God that the Prophet Abraham first showed (*asal millet-i-ibrahim ye hai jis par main hun*, ibid). However, one cannot assume, without further inquiry, that the perfect surrender (*islam*) of the Prophet (peace be upon him) is identical with Islamic society and government.

Islahi acknowledges the perfect harmony of *millet ibrahim* and *millet-i-islam* in the person of the Prophet (peace be upon him) in his discussion of verse 163:

I shall (always) be foremost among those who surrender themselves unto Him.

Islahi could have interpreted these verses about the Prophet (peace be upon him) as an invitation and a challenge to all believers who will hear and obey them in subsequent ages. But one is left with the impression that Islahi has turned the exhortatory nature of this verse into a description of the actual life and practice of Muslim believers and implies that all these believers are practicing *islam* perfectly like the Prophet (peace be upon him). Indeed, *din* is one, undivided reality (*asal din bunyadi taur par ek hi hai, farq hai to ijmal o tafsil aur aghaz o takmil ka hai*, ibid, p. 205). In the course of history, however, men and women have given different expressions to *din*.

Islam as the religion of Abraham

Verse 14 of this Surah refers to the Prophet (peace be upon him):

Say: I am bidden to be foremost among those who surrender themselves unto God and not to be among those who ascribe divinity to aught besides Him.

In his comment on this verse, Islahi says that the Prophet was the first to follow *islam* (*sab se pahla islam lane wala*, ibid, p. 30), which in the context of this verse, means recognition and affirmation of God as “the Originator of the heavens and the earth”. Islahi finds a similar context for verse 56, which rejects the worship of “those (beings) whom you invoke instead of God”. Hence *islam* in this context has the same meaning as *din* has in the previous section, namely, the worship of one God or monotheism (*wo wahda la sharik hai*, ibid, p. 66). Moreover, verse 66 insists that the Prophet (peace be upon him) is not responsible for the faith or the *islam* of those to whom he is sent (*iman o islam*, ibid, p. 73). Islahi sees an intimate connection between faith and *islam*, for he uses the same phrase, bringing together faith and *islam*, with regard to verse 111 (*iman o islam*, ibid, p. 142) and again in connection with verse 133 (cf. ibid, p. 167).

Furthermore, the understanding of *islam*, expressed in verse 79, is no different:

Behold, unto Him who brought into being the heavens and the earth have I turned my face, having turned away from all that is false; and I am not of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside Him.

According to Islahi, this verse is a perfect statement of the unity of God, *islam*, and the faith of Abraham together (*ye tauhid aur islam ki azim ayat aur millet-i-ibrahim ka kalimah jami'ah hai*, ibid, p. 96). Verses 84-90 are

all expressions of the unity of God and *islam* (*tauhid aur islam*, ibid, p. 101), a phrase Islahi repeats several times⁴⁹, thereby indicating its significance. The straight path, so often mentioned in the Qur'an, is another example of the identification of *islam* and *monotheism*. The straight path is the way of *islam* (*ye islam hai to khuda ki khuli hui sidhi rah*, ibid, p. 162) and it can be used to refer both to the faith of Abraham as well as to *islam* itself (*millet ibrahim aur millet islam ke liye ist'emal hua hai*, ibid, p. 210). When Islahi states that *millet-i-islami* has freed believers of all unnatural burdens (cf. ibid, p. 193), he simply substitutes the faith of Abraham with the word *islam*.

Islahi says that, in the words of verse 127, the word *islam* refers to those who are living in the "abode of peace" (*in logon ka jin ke sine allah ta'ala islam ke liye kulta hai*, ibid, p. 162). Again, the last words of verse 71 are a clear expression of *islam* in its more basic sense of surrender to God:

We have been bidden to surrender ourselves unto the Sustainer of all the worlds.

Islahi links these words with the words that follow immediately in the next verse about the need for constant prayer, thereby stressing the more external dimension of the inner attitude of surrender to God (*namaz ka zikir yahan is islam ke awwalin 'amli mazhar ki haisiyat se hua hai*, ibid, p. 83). Similarly, Islahi brings out the external dimension of *islam* again in his comment on the last part of verse 89:

And now, although the unbelievers may choose to deny these truths, (know that) We have entrusted them to people who will never refuse to acknowledge them.

Islahi says that the "people who will never refuse to acknowledge" these truths are those people who have already "entered *islam*" and who will do so in the future (cf. ibid, p. 103). Islahi goes so far as to say that this verse is a prophecy of the great numbers who will one day enter Islam as an actual community (*ummat ki kasrat ki peshangoi hai*, ibid).

This tendency to view *islam* from the outside, as it were, in terms of the followers of a separate group or a separate religion, becomes more marked in Islahi's discussion of verse 68:

Now, whenever thou meet such as indulge in (blasphemous) talk about Our messages, turn thy back upon them until they begin to talk of other things.

⁴⁹ Cf. ibid, p. 104 and ibid, p. 134.

Instead of understanding these words as referring to people who reject the “messages of God” (*ayatina*), Islahi accuses those opposed to *islam* of making fun of the Qur’an (*islam ke mukhalafin quran ka mazaq urane par*, *ibid*, p. 77) precisely because they are opponents of *islam* (*mukhalafin-i-islam*, *ibid*). In the same vein, Islahi makes the parable in verse 71, which is of general intent (*‘umumi tamsil*, *ibid*, p. 82), apply to the specific opponents of Islam⁵⁰ as a new religion (*ye in mukhalafin-i-islam ki tamsil hai*, *ibid*).

It seems to me that Islahi has shifted from one level of the meaning of religion to another. He has moved from understanding *islam* as the monotheistic faith of Abraham to *Islam* understood as a community of believers who experienced opposition and even rejection to their way of life. Sometimes Islahi brings these two notions together. On the one hand, Islahi describes the propaganda that is directed against *the Muslims* (who are no longer referred to simply as “the believers”) because they are seen to be promoting a new creed or faith (*musalmanon ke khilaf . . . ye propaganda sharu’ kiya hoga ke ye lo, ye naye din wale*, *ibid*, p. 157). Yet, on the other hand, for the remainder of his discussion of verse 121, Islahi understands Islam as an established religion with clear instructions on the sensitive issue of food that is *halal* (*islam mein sirf yahi chiz najaiz nahin hai . . . ibid*, p. 158). Islahi continues this line of thinking about Islam as a religion when he turns the simple instruction contained in verse 118:

Eat, then, of that over which God’s name has been pronounced, if you truly believe in His messages,
into an official pronouncement of what is considered *halal* by Islam (*jah islam ne wo tamam chaupae halal o tayib qarar de diye yo mushrikin ne apne mushrikana tuhimat ke taht haram qarar de rakha tha*, *ibid*, p. 154)⁵¹.

As a consequence of this distinction between *islam* and *Islam*, Islahi is able to place the Muslims and the hypocrites into two well-defined camps. Islam is no longer simply an invitation to self-surrender to God (*islam*) but has become a separate faith or creed (*millet-i-islam*, *ibid*, p. 191), distinct from the creed of the Jews and the Christians. The “self-surrender” mentioned in the first part of verse 125:

And whomsoever God wills to guide, his bosom He opens with willingness towards self-surrender (unto Him),

⁵⁰ Henceforward, I will use a capital letter for the word “Islam” to bring out its distinction from the word *islam*. Muhammad Asad says that the word “Islam” is definitely post-Qur’anic. Cf. Asad (1980), p. 886, footnote 17.

⁵¹ Cf. *ibid*, p. 195 for a similar pronouncement based on verse 147.

has been made to apply, by Islahi, to a group of Muslim believers who have become separate from the Jews and the Christians. The Muslims, rather than the Jews and the Christians have, according to Islahi's interpretation of this verse, accepted *islam* (*qabul-i- islam*, *ibid*, p. 161). Islahi identifies the interior surrender of *islam* with an acceptance of its external manifestations in the religion of Islam. It is one thing to affirm that *islam* can lead one to enter the Muslim community (Islam) but to *identify* the two can result in unacceptable conclusions.

Finally, Islahi simply assumes that the statement in verse 159 about dividing into sects refers only to what happened to the Jews and the Christians:

Verily, as for those who have broken the unity of their faith and have become sects -- thou hast nothing to do with them. Behold, their case rests with God: and in time He will make them understand what they were doing.

Islahi fails to understand the verse as a warning of what could happen to the new community of Muslim believers as well (*'arboṇ ne shirk o but parasti ki rah ikhtiyar kar li . . . yahud o nisara ne yahudiyaṭ o nasraniyaṭ ke shakhone khare kar kar liye*, *ibid*, p. 209). The Prophet (peace be upon him) has come to heal these divisions (*khatam al anbiyaṭ salla allahu alayhi wa sallam ke zariy'ah se ye sirat mustaqim dunya ke liye phir khuli*, *ibid*), not necessarily by annihilating all differences between religious communities. Islahi did not include in this discussion those verses that affirm the existence of separate communities to test the believers.⁵²

The Social Context of the Quraysh

Islahi says that verse 52, though addressed to the Prophet (peace be upon him), is directed to the leaders of the Quraysh, since it was not possible to address them directly (*bat in ko mukhatab kar ke kahne ke bajae paighambar ko mukhatab kar ke kahi gayi hai ta ke in par ye wazeh ho jaye ke in ki ye bat is qabl bhi nahin hai ke in ko barah-i-rast mukhatab kar ke is ka jawab dia jaye*, *ibid*, p. 59). The subsequent explanation that Islahi gives as to why the Quraysh were addressed seems to consist of his own personal reflections based on the Traditions. Similarly, the last phrase of verse 114, though addressed to the Prophet, is directed to others:

Be not, then, among the doubters.

⁵² Cf. verse 62 and verse 148 of Surah *Al Baqarah*; also, verse 48 and verse 69 of Surah *Al Maidah*.

Islahi says it was addressed to the leaders of society at the time (*sosaiti ke lidar aur qaum ke asrar*, ibid, p. 145). Likewise, Islahi states that the last sentence of verse 144:

Behold, God does not grace (such) evildoing folk with His guidance, is addressed to the leaders of the Quraysh (*yahan jo log zer-i-bahs hain ye quraysh ke wo sadat hain jo in ki mazhabi peshwai kar rahe they*, ibid, p. 189).

The Religious Context of the Jews

Islahi is very critical of the Jews, saying that there was no law of God that the Jews readily accepted (*shari'ah ka koi hukm aisa nahin hai jis ko unhone bakhushi qabul ki ho*, ibid, p. 192). Earlier, commenting on verse 91, Islahi said the Jews had kept much of the Torah hidden and exposed only a small part of it (*kitab ilahi ka ziyadah hissah yahud ne chupa liya tha*, ibid, p. 108). Islahi says that Jesus and other Prophets had also accused the Jews of keeping the Torah hidden (cf. ibid). Islahi speaks of the destructive disposition of the Jews in general (*in ke fasad-i-mizaj*, ibid, p. 193). Moreover, the People of the Book invented Judaism and Christianity, which have no relation with the religion of Abraham (*in ki ijad kardah yahudiyat o nasraniyat ko millet ibrahimi se koi ta'lluq nahin hai*, ibid, p. 84).

The Social Context of the Believers

Although the person addressed in verse 68 is singular, the intention is to address all Muslims:

Now, whenever thou meet such as indulge in (blasphemous) talk about Our messages, turn thy back upon them until they begin to talk of other things.

Islahi says that there are indications from the following verse (*qarina*) that verses 68 and 69 are addressed to all Muslims collectively through the person of the Prophet (*qarina yahi hai ke khitab an hazrat se ho lekin ye khitab an hazrat ke wasta se tamam musalmanon se hai*, ibid, p. 77). Although Islahi repeats that these verses are meant as guidance for all Muslims (*musalmanon ko hidayat hui*, ibid), Islahi's subsequent discussion describes the social context in which people used to argue against Islam (*ye log mukhalafin islam ke in majelison mein sharik hote hai*, ibid). Hence, the guidance given in this specific context is directed to the Muslims of that period (*kalam ka rukh musalmanon ki taraf tha*, ibid, p. 79).

Different Kinds of Language

Islahi says that he has already dealt with the “sealing of hearts” (*khatam qalub*) in his discussion of Surah *Al Baqarah*. Verse 25 of the present Surah says:

Over their hearts We have laid veils which prevent them from grasping the truth, and into their ears deafness.

Islahi says that the “veils” and the “deafness” mentioned in this verse obviously have a figurative meaning (*ma'nwi aur rohani hijab*, *ibid*, p. 34), indicating the ways in which human beings fail to use their special ability to listen and to become aware (*dilon aur kanon ko sunane aur samajhne ki is salahiyat se mahrum kar rahe jo insaniyat ka asli khassah hai*, *ibid*).⁵³ Islahi says that seeing and hearing in this context goes beyond the physical ability to see and to hear. Since the verse is referring to the readiness of a person to accept the truth, the “seeing and hearing” mentioned here should not be limited to the physical act of seeing and hearing (*zahir hai ke ye samajhna, dekna aur sunana apne haqiqi mafhum ke lihaz se hai*, *ibid*, p. 398). By *haqiqi mafhum* Islahi means that these words have a more profound meaning than the literal or physical meaning.⁵⁴ Islahi notes that the “sealing of hearts” by God occurs under certain conditions determined by the pattern of events Islahi has called “the way of God” (*sunnat allah*). I discuss this concept in Surah Group Three and Four.

Islahi describes the allegorical use of words in the first part of verse 122:

Is then he who was dead (in spirit) and whom We thereupon gave life, and for whom We set up a light whereby he might see his way among men – (is then he) like one (who is lost) in darkness deep, out of which he cannot emerge?

Islahi calls this a parable (*tamsil*, *ibid*, p. 159). However, instead of allowing the words and images of the parable (such as “dead”, “life”, “light”, “see” and “darkness”) to retain their profound meaning as symbols, Islahi gives them a specific connotation, saying that the verse refers to the life of faith and the light brought by the Book (*apni kitab ki shakl mein*, *ibid*). Islahi even limits the parable to a specific addressee by saying that its purpose was to encourage the Muslims of that period in their struggles (*is tamsil ke pesh karne se maqsud musalmanon ki hauslah afzai hai*, *ibid*).

⁵³ There is a similar message in verse 179 of Surah *Al A'raf*.

⁵⁴ Islahi uses the phrase: “*haqiqi ma'ni*” to refer to a similar invitation, expressed in verse 36, to listen and to understand with the *heart* rather than only physically with the ears (*ibid*, p. 45).

Islahi is interpreting the verse in the light of the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah (*surah ke is 'umud ko pesh nazar rakhte hue*, *ibid*, p. 10).

Islahi's explanation of the Qur'anic view of history is another example of the way words may be given an additional or symbolic meaning. According to Islahi, the history of people and nations presented in this Surah is not merely an explanation of what happened to them but a warning and a lesson for the Quraysh (*ye tarikh suna kar quran ne 'arbon ko mutanbbah kiya*, *ibid*, p. 35). In other words, Qur'anic history is not merely an exposition of facts and events but a particular perspective on these facts and events that interprets them in terms of a "spiritual and ethical disease" afflicting certain nations (*akhlaqi o rohani himarion mein muhtala huen*, *ibid.*). Islahi describes the Arabs as being mystified by this new, faith-inspired perspective of history, which he claims to be the Qur'anic approach (*quran ke is tarikhi nuqtah nazar*, *ibid*, p. 36). In short, Qur'anic history is not simply an academic discipline but an argument or proof directed towards the Quraysh (*tarikh tumhare upar hujjat hai*, *ibid*, p. 168). Islahi uses this view of Qur'anic history to formulate the theme (*'umud*) of Surah Group Two.

The Surah also presents a perspective on history that is evident in all the Surahs of this Surah Group, namely that the rise and the decline of nations is based on their moral conduct and use of power and responsibility (cf. *ibid*, pp. 35-36). Islahi calls this a "law of nature" (*qudrat ka qanun*, *ibid*, p. 35) and the principle of the rise and fall of nations (*'uruj o zawal ke is usul*, *ibid.*) is presented to the Quraysh for their spiritual benefit.

The Appeal to Reason

Islahi appeals constantly to logic and rationality to bring out the meaning of this Surah. Let us take part of verse 38 as our starting point:

There is no beast that walks on earth and no bird that flies on its two wings which is not God's creature like yourselves; no single thing have We neglected in Our decree.

Islahi states that this verse, like many others in the Surah, appeals to a person's ability to think and to draw simple conclusions. It is obvious to Islahi that the world cannot be without a purpose (*kiya ye sara karkhana bilkul bemaqsud, beghayat aur beanjam nazar ata hai?* *ibid*, p. 49) and that every person of sound mind is compelled to accept this fact (*insan ki fitrat agar maskh aur is ki 'aql agar mafluj na ho gayi ho to wo is 'itraf par majbur hai*, *ibid*). To deny the difference between right and wrong, justice

and oppression, truth and falsehood would be to go against reason (*ye bat insan ki 'aql o fitrat kisi tarah bhi qabul nahin kar sakti*, ibid, p. 83).

Moreover, there is evidence of perfect *planning* in the universe (cf. ibid, p. 120). Islahi says that even the moral law is clear in every respect (*har azadi aur har pabandi ke liye ma'lum o ma'ruf hudud o qaiyud hai*, ibid). Islahi finds the evidence for God's unity and the arguments for man's moral accountability on the Last Day (cf. ibid, p. 186) in the signs provided by the universe, which provide abundant evidence that it is not without moral purpose (*ye kainat apne wujud se shahadat deti hai ke ye kisi khilandare ka khel nahin hai*, ibid, p. 169). All this is simply self-evident to human beings with a sound mind (*ye har is shakhs ke dil ki awaz hai jo is nazam-i-kainat par 'aql salim aur qalb-i-salim se ghaur karta hai*, ibid, p. 119).

Islahi's perception of science and the questions a scientist raises reflects the character of the period in which Islahi was living. He says that the scientist looks at the world only to derive some benefit from it (*is ki nagah sirf apne naf' 'ajil par hoti hai*, ibid.). Such an attitude, says Islahi, prevents the scientist from affirming the deeper truths of the universe. Citing the example of Isaac Newton observing the apple falling to the ground, Islahi says that Newton's discoveries, for all their value, could not lead to the affirmation of the Creator of all these phenomena. The scientist avoids this conclusion because of the responsibilities it involves (cf. ibid, p. 91).

Commenting on verse 99, Islahi repeats his perception of the role of science and scientists, saying that scientists never ask the question concerning the responsibility their work involves (*in par koi zimmadari bhi 'aid hoti hai ya nahin?* ibid, p. 126). It is as if scientists have no sense of responsibility at all (*goya . . . zimmadari in ke upar koi bhi nahin dali*, ibid). He gives the example of scientists learning about the ancient civilizations of Harappa and Mohenjodaro without drawing the moral conclusions that emerge as a result of their discoveries since only faith can draw out these conclusions (cf. ibid, p. 127). Islahi does not acknowledge that science has its own autonomy and responsibility.

After dismissing the logic of science, Islahi proceeds to deduce the meaning of verse 99, providing five consecutive conclusions (cf. ibid, p. 128). The primary observation that this wonderful universe could not exist unless an all-powerful and wise God had made it leads immediately to the conclusion that the universe works together harmoniously (*ek khas tanasub ke sath*

khidmat hasil karti hai, ibid). The next point is that this harmonious universe supports the need for a final day of reckoning (*is 'ilm aur is hikmat ka lazmi taqaza hai ke aisa din ayen*, ibid). The next step in the argument is to conclude that God's abundant gifts to man demand a response in gratitude and obedience to God's laws and that, on the day of reckoning, man will have to give an account of the response he has made to God. The final conclusion is that such a beneficent God could not fail to respond to the desire for his guidance that he himself has placed in our hearts (*jo us ne hamari ruh aur hamare dil ke andar apni hidayat ke liye wadiat firmai hai*, ibid, p. 129). Just as God made provisions for our physical needs, so has God provided guidance for our spiritual journey (cf. ibid). Basing his argument on a similar logical pattern (*'aql o fitrat*), Islahi rejects the doctrines of the pre-Islamic Arabs (*mushrikin 'arab*, ibid, p. 130) as well as the doctrines of the Christians who attribute a son to God (cf. ibid). Reason and nature (*'aql o fitrat*) demand that we affirm a supreme Creator (*jin ka manana azrue 'aql o fitrat wajib hai*, ibid, p. 131).

Furthermore, Islahi rejects wine because it is against reason (*is liye ke is mein 'aqli o akhlaqi khabasat hai*, ibid, p. 195). Islahi says that verse 141:

Eat of their fruit when it comes to fruition and give (to the poor) their due on harvest day,

is based on a rational way of thinking about nature (*yahi bat 'aql o fitrat ke mutabiq hai*, ibid, p. 184). Islahi also totally rejects the taxation system of non-Islamic regimes as devoid of all value or justice (*is barkat aur is 'adl se bilkul khali hai*, ibid.) even though non-Islamic regimes also base their taxation schemes on reason and nature.

Islahi even uses the term "reason and nature" (*'aql o fitrat*) in his condemnation of family planning (cf. ibid, pp. 199-200). It is interesting to note that this is one of the few instances where Islahi comments explicitly on a practice prevalent in modern society. The point to note is that Islahi makes a direct link between verse 151:

Do not kill your children for fear of poverty – (for) it is We who shall provide sustenance for you as well as for them,

and the practice of contraception and abortion prevalent among people in the modern world (*maujuda zamane ka insan*, ibid, p. 200) without taking into account the historical, cultural and social factors operative at the time of revelation, as he usually does. In short, Islahi holds that family planning is unacceptable because, according to verse 151, God will provide sustenance for all children.

Conclusions

Islahi stresses that several verses of the Surah are addressed to the leaders of the Quraysh (*sosaiti ke lidar aur qaum ke asrar*, ibid, p. 145) and to the Muslims (*kalam ka rukh musalmanon ki taraf tha*, ibid, p. 79). By highlighting the specific addressee of these verses, Islahi has restricted their meaning to the past context of revelation and fails to show how these verses have a universal connotation. Instead of mentioning that, when the Qur'an addresses the Prophet (peace be upon him), the Qur'an is addressing all mankind, Islahi says that the Qur'an specifically addresses *the Muslims* through the Prophet (*qarina yahi hai ke khitaab an hazrat se ho lekin ye khitaab an hazrat ke wasta se tamam musalmanon se hai*, ibid, p. 77). These verses lose their universal meaning by being addressed to the Muslims.

Islahi is far too general in his criticism of the Jews, saying that there was no law of God that the Jews readily accepted (*shari'ah ka koi hukm aisa nahin hai jis ko unhone bakhushi qabul ki ho*, ibid, p. 192). In contrast to this assertion of Islahi, the Qur'an says that several Jews remained faithful to the Torah. Islahi also rejects Judaism and Christianity as having no connection with the religion of Abraham (*millet ibrahimi se koi ta'lluq nahin hai*, ibid, p. 84). On the contrary, although the Jews and the Christians practiced *din* in a way that was somewhat different from the way the Muslims practiced *din*, both Judaism and Christianity were based on the faith of the Prophet Abraham. It is incorrect to dismiss Judaism and Christianity *en toto*, as Islahi does.

Furthermore, Islahi rejects the taxation system of non-Islamic regimes as devoid of all value or justice (*is barkat aur is 'adl se bilkul khali hai*, ibid, p. 184). However, the Islamic community took over some of the basic ideas of the taxation system from the Iranian, Byzantine and Roman Empires.

Islahi gives the word *millet* three different meanings:

1. *millet* denotes the *faith* or *religion* of the Prophet Abraham;
2. *millet* refers to the *community* of those who surrender themselves to God as Abraham did;
3. *millet* can refer to the *laws* or *doctrines* that Abraham accepted.

In his discussion of Surah *Al Hajj*, Islahi refers to *millet* and *nations* in one phrase (*tamam milleton aur qaumon ka asl din*, vol. 5, p. 326). Islahi refers to the community of Muslims as *millet-i-muslimah* in his discussion of

Surah *Al Baqarah* (cf. vol. 1, p. 476). Moreover, in his discussion of verse 51 of Surah *Al Maidah*, Islahi uses the word *millet* to urge the Muslims to form a community (*jis tarah wo musalmanon ke khilaf bahaisiyat jama't millet-i-wahidah hain isi tarah musalman in ke muqabil mein millet-i-wahidah banen*, vol. 2, p. 543). Another illustration of his use of the word *millet* in the sense of *community* is his reference to the Jews as a community in his comment on verse 168 of Surah *Al A'raf* (*yahud . . . ijtimai' haisiyat se wo in ausaf se mahrum ho chuke they jo ek millet ki haisiyat se in ko dunya mein sar buland rakhne ke liye zaruri they*, vol. 3, p. 381). Islahi also uses the word *millet* to refer to the faith of Abraham (*millet-i-ibrahimi*) and to the laws and doctrines of *islam* (*millet-i-islam*).

Just as Islahi uses the word *millet* in different ways, he also gives different meanings to the word *islam*. *Islam* can mean the total surrender of oneself to God. It can also refer to the community that one enters (*jo is waqt tak dakhli-islam ho chuki thi aur wo log bhi hain jin ke liye ba'd mein is ke hamilin mein dakhil hona maqadar tha*, *ibid*, p. 103). Islahi even says that verse 89 is a prophecy of the great numbers of people that will one day enter *Islam* as an actual community (*ummat ki kasrat ki peshangoi hai*, *ibid*).

Likewise, when Islahi refers to *millet-i-ibrahimi*, he can mean both *islam* in the sense of surrender to God as well as *millet islam* in the sense of the laws and doctrines that Abraham accepted. The laws revealed in verse 151 are part of the *millet-i-ibrahimi* (cf. *ibid*, p. 201). Islahi says that the phrase *dinan qiyaman* in verse 161 has the sense of *millet-i-ibrahimi* as well as that of *millet islam* (*quran mein ye lafz millet ibrahim aur millet islam ke liye iste'mal hua hai*, *ibid*, p. 210).⁵⁵

Since Islahi uses all these terms interchangeably, his concept of *din* lacks clarity. He has said in more than one place that *din* is basically one and undivided (*asl din bunyadi taur par ek hi hai*, *ibid*, p. 205). In his introduction to Surah *Al 'Imran*, Islahi says that *din* cannot be divided into parts (*din mein taqsim o tajziah ki koi gunjaish nahin hai*, vol. 2, p. 11). Commenting on verses 48-50 of Surah *Al Maidah*, Islahi says that the truths of *din* remain unchanged (*jahan tak din ke haqiqat ka ta'lluq hai wo hamesha se ghair mutaghayyar hain aur ghair mutaghayyar hi rahenge*, vol. 2, p.

⁵⁵ Similarly, in Surah *Al Anfal*, *din* can refer to obedience to the laws of God (*din . . . apne rah ke ahkam ki ta'mil hi mein samajhte hain*, vol. 3, p. 432).

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535). But the historical situation at the time of revelation forces Islahi to admit that *din* has taken a particular form in Islamic society.

Islahi reads the Surah from the vantage point of the Muslim community that had grown strong and even enjoyed political power in Medina. He understands *din-i-ibrahimi* in this light and allows the laws of Islamic society and government to determine his particular understanding of *din-i-ibrahimi*. He identifies the *din* of the Prophet Abraham with the specific conditions of Islamic society as it was at the time of revelation. What is most problematic is that he considers this particular manifestation of *din* to be the ideal one.

On the other hand, in his comment on verse 163 of the present Surah, Islahi says that, although *din* is one and undivided, its expression can differ (*asl din buniyadi taur par ek hi hai, farq hai to ijmal o tafsil aur aghaz o takmil ka hai*, ibid, p. 205). In other words, *din* is expressed in different ways (*ijmal o tafsil*) and according to the different periods of history in which it occurs (*aghaz o takmil*). This amounts to saying that the one reality called *din* can take on many different forms as men and women in the course of history express the total surrender of the Prophet Abraham according to their own conditions and circumstances. However, Islahi does not embrace this principle consistently, rejecting forms of *din* that differ from Islamic society in Medina.

It seems to me that Islahi mixes one level of the meaning of religion with another. He unites his understanding *islam* as the monotheistic faith of Abraham with *Islam* understood as a community of believers who experienced opposition for their efforts to establish an Islamic society and government in Medina. Since Islahi does not make a distinction between *islam* and *Islam*, he can identify the total surrender of a person to God with membership of Islamic society and with acceptance of the laws and punishments of Islamic government. However, it seems to me that *islam* does not necessarily demand entry into the Muslim community (*Islam*).

The result of Islahi's analysis is to make *Islam* into a religion that is distinct and separate from that of the Jews and the Christians. He divides the Jews, the Christians and the Muslims into separate camps. However, the Prophet (peace be upon him) came to heal these divisions and to make the straight path available to everyone (*ye sirat mustaqim dunya ke liye phir kholi*, ibid, 209), not by annihilating all differences between religious communities but

by suggesting ways to live together in harmony. On the contrary, Islahi stresses differences between religious communities that could result in conflict.

I am convinced that the conflict between the Jews, the Christians and the Muslims, both at the time of revelation and today, could be better understood as a social and political conflict rather than as a conflict about different expressions of *din* – about which there need be no conflict. Islahi, however, stresses that different expressions of *din* led to conflict at the time of revelation and he implies that *din* will continue to be an issue.

Furthermore, Islahi presents a rational argument for the existence of God and the Last Day as if this is perfectly evident to anyone with a sound mind (*ye har is shakhs ke dil ki awaz hai jo is nizam-i-kainat par 'aql salim aur qalb-i-salim se ghaur karta hai*, *ibid*, p. 119). Islahi claims that even what is *haram* and *halal* can be explained in terms of reason and nature (*ab is millet mein haram wohi chizen hain jo 'aql o fitrat ki ro se haram honi chaiye*, *ibid*, p. 194). What further need is there for faith if the argument is so clear for everyone to understand?

Moreover, the questions Islahi places in the heart and mind of Abraham are articulated in such a way that they reflect the rational way of thinking more characteristic of Islahi's own times. For example, one of Abraham's questions was: "Does this world have a Creator or did it just appear from nowhere?" (*is dunya ka koi khaliq hai ya ye khud hi a dhamki hai?* *ibid*, p. 90). However, Islahi himself says that the Arabs never questioned the existence of a supreme God (*ahl 'arab sari kainat ka khaliq khuda hi ko mante they*, *ibid*, p. 129). It may well be true, as Islahi claims, that Abraham's people were argumentative (*cf. ibid*, p. 93) but what is presented as Abraham's way of thinking (*hazrat ibrahim ke tarze khitab aur istadlal*, *ibid.*) seems to reflect Islahi's own logic.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ It seems to me that Islahi could be included among the modernist Islamic modernists of the 19th and 20th centuries that C.W. Troll describes in an unpublished paper for a seminar held in Deir Mar Musa, Syria, in September 2006. He writes that these thinkers "perceived modernity as their ally and, importantly, they attached high priority to rationality . . .

These thinkers, however, took only scant note of the critical light of modern knowledge, which had been developed in the modern humanities. Their ranks included only few intellectuals who were able and willing to apply the insights of critical scholarship in history, literature, sociology and psychology to interpreting the Qur'an and the hadiths." p. 11.

Finally, Islahi's perception of the scientist as a person who avoids the serious responsibilities involved in the search for scientific knowledge (*goya . . . zimmadari in ke upar koi bhi nahin dali*, *ibid*, p. 126) does not seem to be a view shared by all Muslim scholars.⁵⁷ Moreover, by stressing the separation between faith on the one hand, and science on the other, Islahi undermines the contribution that scientific research can provide for an understanding of the Qur'an.

⁵⁷ On the relationship between faith and science, Seyyed Vali Reza discusses the thought of Sayyid Ahmad Khan and of Mawdudi, both of whom may have influenced Islahi. Reza writes: "Discussing the relationship between Islam and science, Sayyid Ahmad Khan said that 'true reason is Islamic' – that is, not only is faith predicated on reason, but more important, reason leads to faith. Mawdudi used this basic premise to interpret Islam, but in his interpretation reason was not merely the means for fostering a dialogue between Islam and modern science, it was a hermeneutic too. In Mawdudi's works, however, rationalism was often modified by his apologetic posturing vis-à-vis Western thought. The need to defend Islam using the rational method often led him to what H.A.R. Gibb called a 'shocking . . . method of argument and treatment of facts . . . and writing to a predetermined conclusion'. He stretched rationalism to its limits and, at times, found himself in rather untenable positions." Reza (1996), p. 131.

Surah Al A'raf

Introduction

The invitation that Surah *Al An'am* extends to the Quraysh is to accept the version of Islam that was passed on to his descendants by the Prophet Abraham (*yahi asl millet ibrahim hai*, vol. 3, p. 215), not the collection of untruths (*majmu'ah bida'at o auham*, *ibid*) that captivated the Quraysh. God favoured the Quraysh by sending them a Prophet who came with a divine message (*allah ki hujjat*, *ibid*) so there is no reason for them to remain in darkness any longer (*gumrahi par jame rahne*, *ibid*). The Quraysh should remember the evidence of history, which shows how God always destroys a nation that persists in its denial after the message has been presented to them with all clarity (*itmam-i-hujjat ke ba'd*, *ibid*). The history of the people ruled during this time by the Quraysh provides enough evidence to support this conclusion. Many nations more powerful than the Quraysh existed in this very land before the Quraysh came to power. There is no reason why the natural course of events (*qudrat ka qanun*, *ibid*) should be any different for the Quraysh than it was for these former nations. God has given the Quraysh the place that was previously occupied by them but that God took away from them because of their crimes. If the Quraysh commit the same crimes, why should God not deal with them in the same way? God's law is one and the same for everyone.

Surah *Al A'raf* is the second of a pair with the previous Surah. In Surah *Al A'raf*, the dominant mood is one of warning rather than of invitation to Islam. In this Surah, the Quraysh are warned very clearly that God will punish them if they do not change their ways. The Surah begins by pointing out their crimes in summary form. After that, a detailed account is given of former nations which were once powerful in this land and which gradually began to perpetrate the crimes that the Quraysh are now committing. The last verse of the previous Surah *Al An'am* refers briefly to this situation.

The Surah also gives the Jews a last warning. Finally, reference is made to the covenant (*ahd fitrat*, *ibid*) that all the descendants of Adam made with God. The Surah warns of the ultimate consequences of this covenant. After this comes the acquittal of responsibility (*bara'at*, *ibid*) on the part of the Prophet (peace be upon him) followed by the migration, the proclamation of war and the execution of God's punishment.

The Theme of the Surah: Islam as the Religion of Abraham

Islahi investigates the nature of the religion of Abraham as part of his effort to clarify the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah. Verse 29 says:

Say: My Sustainer has (but) enjoined the doing of what is right; and (He desires you to) put your whole being into every act of worship, and to call unto Him, sincere in your faith in Him alone. As it was He who brought you into being in the first instance, so also (unto Him) you will return.

According to Islahi, this verse opens the way to distinguish true from false religion. The "wisdom of *din*" (*hikmat-i-din*) lies in the application of the principle of justice, which is a criterion by means of which we can recognize the true *din* from God and distinguish it from the false (*qist ek aisi kausuti hai ke jo shakhs hikmat-i-din se ashna ho wo is par parakh ke jan sakta hai*, *ibid*, p. 250). Islahi says he has already discussed this concept of justice in his commentary on Surah *Al 'Imran*, in which justice was to be administered by the new community of Muslims. Justice is also the basis of the *shari'ah*, according to Islahi (*qist ek jam'a haqiqat hai jo tamam shari'at ilahi ki ruh hai*, *ibid*, p. 249). Islahi does not develop the link between justice and the *shari'ah* at this point because verse 29 stresses the Last Day and the unity of God (*akhirat aur tauhid*, *ibid*, p. 250), the two basic aspects of *din*.

Islahi interprets verse 51 to mean that people were making fun of religion (*jo chiz in par din ke haisiyat se uthari is ko unhone hansa maskhari mein uraya*, *ibid*, p. 271). Yet, in verse 70, the people were angry because they felt the Prophet was asking them to "give up all that our forefathers were wont to worship". It seems to me that the people were not making fun of the religion of their ancestors (*apne bazurgon ke din*, *ibid*, p. 298) but were giving a high priority to their own pleasures. They were, in fact, turning their own interests and pleasures into their religion, instead of allowing religion to determine their choice of interests and pleasures. For, as Islahi says, religion has a bearing on every aspect of one's life (*din is liye ata hai ke wo zindagi ke har pahlu mein sahih nuqta nazar muta'ayyan kare*, *ibid*, p. 271). In other words, the religion of Abraham is not simply a matter of certain rituals that make no demands on one's life and behaviour. On the contrary, the religion of Abraham makes demands on every part of one's life.

In the introduction to this Surah, Islahi says that the mood has changed from that of an invitation to accept the religion of Abraham to that of a warning

about the consequences of not doing so. Islahi continues to understand *islam* in its primary sense of “surrender to God”. Since the period of invitation to *islam* has now passed by, however, there is presumably no need to dwell any further on the fact that *islam* is identical with the religion of Abraham (*millet-i-ibrahim*) as was done in the previous Surah. Hence there are only two references to the simple link between faith and *islam* (*iman o islam*, *ibid*, p. 339 and again in *ibid*, p. 349), a link which ignores the more complicated relationship between faith and the history of *Islam* – understood as a formal religion or a community of believers with its own separate laws, doctrines and practices.

Another indication that Islahi is concerned here with the primary sense of *islam* as submission to God is to be found in his reference to “believing people” living at the time when the Prophet *Shu'ayb* was sent to the people of *Madyan*, as described in verse 85. Even before the advent of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), Islahi considers these believing people living in *Madyan* to be *muslims* (cf. *ibid*, p. 311). Clearly, these people were *muslims* in the more primary sense of the word because they were monotheists (*hanafi*), like the Prophet Abraham. Similarly, Islahi recognizes those who accepted the message of the Prophet *Shu'ayb*, as related in verse 90, as true *muslims* (*ibid*, p. 314) simply because they believed in one God.

Islahi finds another clue to the demands of true religion in verse 177, which is a call to accept the evidence God provides about Himself in the heavens and on earth instead of following the dictates of one’s own desires:

Evil is the example of people who are bent on giving the lie to Our messages: for it is against their own selves that they are sinning.

Islahi describes the believer’s response to the evidence and the messages God provides (*ayat-i-ilahi*, *ibid*, p. 397). This evidence is simply available to anyone with an open heart and an open mind. The “religion of Abraham” consists in the response a person makes to the evidence that God provides in the universe (*in ki qadar karen, in ko apnaen, aur zindagi mein in se rahnumai hasil karen*, *ibid*, p. 398). Contrary to the demands of true religion, the Jews were following their own passions (*agar wo qadar nahin karte balke apni khahishat ke ghulam bane rahte hain, to in ka hal wohi hota hai jo yahud ka hai*, *ibid*). True religion demands more than being a member of a recognized group.

Besides this inclusive approach to the “religion of Abraham”, however, Islahi also betrays exclusivist tendencies. For example, the people who, according to verse 46:

were endowed with the faculty of discernment (between right and wrong), recognizing each by its mark, are identified by Islahi as the scholars and jurists of the community of Muslims (*‘ulama o fuqaha ya bilfaz digar rijal-i-ummat*, ibid, p. 268). This interpretation is exclusivist because it limits the “faculty of discernment” to the formal leaders and functionaries of the community. However, earlier Islahi had said that anyone who surrenders to God (*islam*) and who pays attention to the “messages of God” (*ayat-i-ilahi*) is following the religion of Abraham. Islahi reveals his own aristocratic background by stating that the faculty of discernment is restricted to the recognized leaders of the Islamic community.

Finally, how are we to understand Islahi’s references to “the Muslims” in the last section of this Surah? Islahi says that verses 199-202 consist of useful guidance for “the Muslims” (*musalmanon ko*, ibid, p. 411). Verse 201 is even addressed to “all Muslims” (*khitab . . . tamam musalmanon se*, ibid, p. 412). According to the interpretation that Islahi made previously concerning the faculty of discernment, the reference to “all the Muslims” would seem to be a reference to the members of the community led by the formal leaders of Islam (*‘ulama o fuqaha*). In other words, “the Muslims” would refer primarily to all formal members of Islam. Yet, in the light of our earlier discussion about *din* and *islam* being the true religion of Abraham, *muslims* could be understood in the more primary sense of those who surrender themselves to the one God because of the abundant evidence they find in the world around them. Islahi has introduced this ambiguity into the theme (*‘umud*) of the Surah, which makes specific mention of the religion of Abraham.

The Social Context of the Quraysh

According to Islahi, verse 3 is clearly addressed to the Quraysh (*khitab kuffar-i-quraysh se hai*, ibid, p. 222):

“Follow what has been sent down unto you by your Sustainer, and follow no masters other than Him.”⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Islahi says that verse 10 is also addressed to the Quraysh (cf. ibid, p. 228) as well as verse 26 (cf. ibid, p. 245).

Islahi is more concerned to stress that these verses were meant for the Quraysh than to understand them as addressed to all the “children of Adam” (the opening words of verses 26, 27 and 31). Satan (*shaytan*) plays the same tricks on the Quraysh as he did on Adam and Eve (*us ne wohi dayo in par bhi chalaya hai jo adam par chalaya tha*, *ibid*, p. 245). Islahi is illustrating his introductory remark that both *Al An'am* and *Al 'Araf* are addressed to the Quraysh (*an'am o a'raf donon mein khitab ahl makka se hai*, *ibid*, p. 9). According to Islahi (*cf. ibid*, p. 248), it was the Quraysh who were committing the “shameful deed” mentioned in verse 28 and who excused themselves by blaming their forefathers:

We found our forefathers doing it.

Again, the exhortation of verse 31 is directed to the Quraysh (*cf. ibid*, p. 251):

Children of Adam! Beautify yourselves for every act of worship.

Moreover, Islahi says (*cf. ibid*, p. 255) that verse 37 is directly spoken to the Quraysh:

And who could be more wicked than they who attribute their own lying inventions to God or give the lie to His messages?

Similarly, Islahi says that verses 44-45 refers directly to the Quraysh:

God's rejection is the due of the evildoers who turn others away from God's path and try to make it appear crooked, and who refuse to acknowledge the truth of the life to come.

Islahi says that the verse is not just referring to the future but to what the Quraysh were actually doing in the present (*kalam mahz mustaqbil ki ek haqayat ban ke na rah jaye balke hal par bhi puri tarah muntabiq ho jayen*, *ibid*, p. 265).

Islahi goes so far as to identify by name the sinners mentioned in verse 48:

And they who (in life) had possessed this faculty of discernment will call out to those whom they recognize by their marks (as sinners), saying: “What has your amassing (of wealth) availed you, and all the false pride of your past?”

Islahi says that the verse is referring to the leaders of the Quraysh (*ahl a'raf pahchan jayenge ke ye abu lahab hai, ye abu jahl, ye fulan aur ye fulan*, *ibid*, p. 269). Likewise, Islahi states that the phrase from verse 51 expresses a resemblance (*ye ayat bitaur tadmin hai*, *ibid*, p. 271) to the Quraysh since it is they who provide an example of such behaviour (*goya quraysh par ye bat wazeh kar di gayi*, *ibid*):

those who, beguiled by the life of this world, have made play and passing delights their religion.

Furthermore, Islahi says that the pronoun “them” in verse 52 refers to the Quraysh (“*hum*” *ka marja’ quraysh hai*, *ibid*, p. 272):

for, indeed, We did convey unto them a divine writ.

Islahi goes on to say that the purpose of the history related in *Al A'raf* about the rise and fall of nations is to inform the Quraysh that this will be their own doom unless they repent (*quraysh ko ye sari tarikh sunane se maqsud ye hai*, *ibid*, p. 285). So many references to the Quraysh help to confirm Islahi’s formulation of the theme (*‘umud*) as a call to return to the true religion.

In fact, Islahi states that verse 59:

Indeed, We sent forth Noah unto his people, and he said: “O my people! Worship God alone: you have no deity other than Him.

Verily, I fear lest suffering befall you on an awesome Day!”

was meant to enlighten the Quraysh (*is surah mein . . . quraysh ko agah kiya ja raha hai*, *ibid*, p. 293).⁵⁹ Subsequently, the question in verse 97 is directed to the Quraysh (*quraysh ko tawajjeh dilai*, *ibid*, p. 320):

Can, then, the people of any community ever feel secure that Our punishment will not come upon them by night, while they are asleep?

Similarly, the phrase: “those who have inherited the earth” in verse 100 refers to the Quraysh (*se murad yahan quraysh hai*, *ibid*). Islahi sees a reference to the Quraysh in the threat contained in verse 100, which speaks of God “sealing the hearts” (*dhamki yahan quraysh ko di hai*, *ibid*, p. 321). Verse 179 expresses a similar threat for the Quraysh (*ye malhuz rahe ke ye dhamki quraysh ke liye hai*, *ibid*, p. 399):

And most certainly have We destined for hell many of the invisible beings and men who have hearts with which they fail to grasp the truth, and eyes with which they fail to see, and ears with which they fail to hear. They are like cattle – nay, they are even less conscious of the right way: it is they, they who are the (truly) heedless!

Finally, Islahi says that the words “their fellowman” in verse 184 refer to the Prophet (peace be upon him). Since the pronoun “their” is a clear reference to the Quraysh, Islahi concludes that this verse and the subsequent verses all refer to the leaders of the Quraysh. By emphasizing the Quraysh, Islahi finds confirmation of the theme (*‘umud*) of the Surah, which concerns a call to the Quraysh to return to the true religion of Abraham.

⁵⁹ Islahi makes the same statement in his introduction to verses 97-102, which make up the next group of verses (*upar ki tamam sarguzashten sunane se maqsud quraysh ko agah karna tha*, *ibid*, p. 315).

The Social Context of the Jews

Islahi draws far-reaching conclusions from verse 167:

And lo! Thy Sustainer made it known that most certainly He would rouse against them, unto Resurrection Day, people who would afflict them with cruel suffering: verily, thy Sustainer is swift in retribution – yet, verily, He is (also) much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace.

Islahi says that the pronoun “them” refers to the Jews as a nation (*qaum*, *ibid*, p. 381). Islahi even alludes to what happened to the Jews in Germany at the time of Hitler as an illustration of the meaning of this verse. Such an illustration from modern history is not in conformity with Islahi’s method, which is to interpret the verses of the Qur’an in terms of the situation at the time of revelation. Consistency with Islahi’s own method would demand that the pronoun “them” apply to the Jews of that period only.

Islahi draws further conclusions from the historical narrative about the Jews in verse 168:

And We dispersed them as (separate) communities all over the earth; some of them were righteous, and some of them less than that: and the latter We tried with blessings as well as with afflictions, so that they might mend their ways.

Islahi says that this verse denies the Jews the status of a group with its own dignity and convictions (*ijtima’e haisiyat se wo in ausaf se mahrum ho chuke they jo ek millet ke haisiyat se in ko dunya mein sar buland rakhne ke liye zaruri thiy*, *ibid*, p. 381). Islahi is convinced that the Jews were henceforward incapable of avoiding what was evil while at the same time identifying themselves as God’s beloved children (*ham barguzidah ummat hain*, *ibid*, p. 382). Basing himself on verse 170, Islahi says that only a small group of Jews remained righteous (*ahl kitab ke is qalil alta’dad groh . . . jo qaum ke ‘am bigar ke bawajud hak par qaim raha*, *ibid*, p. 383).

In fact, Islahi concludes from verse 103 that God dispossessed the Jews of their mandate:

And after those (early people) We sent Moses with Our messages unto Pharaoh and his great ones, and they willfully rejected them: and behold what happened in the end to those spreaders of corruption!

Islahi says God withdrew the mandate (*amanat*) to uphold the divine law from the Jews and entrusted it to the Muslim community (*ye bani israil hi they jin se khuda ne apne din o shari’ah ki amanat wapes li aur ye amanat*

isi ummat ke hawalah ki, ibid, p. 339). Islahi find confirmation for his views about the Jews in verse 175:

And tell them what happens to him to whom We vouchsafe Our messages and who then discards them: Satan catches up with him, and he strays, like so many others, into grievous error.

Islahi applies the pronoun “him” to the Jews as a nation (“*allazi*” *se murad yahud min hais al qaum hain*, ibid, p. 396). The pronoun does not refer to an individual but to a nation (*qaum*) that rejected God’s messages.⁶⁰

Finally, Islahi applies the parable of the dog in verse 176 to the Jews:

Such is the parable of those who are bent on giving the lie to Our Messages

Islahi says that the pronoun “those” from the above phrase refers to the nation of the Jews (*yahud ki tafsil ke sath jo sarguzasht bayan hui hai is se khud wazeh hai ke ye puri qaum ki qaum hi shar*, ibid, p. 396). Islahi makes it quite clear that, in his opinion, the parable of the dog in verse 176 expresses the condition of the Jews (*bilkul yahi hal yahud ka hai*, ibid, p. 397). He does not state clearly whether he is referring to the Jews of that time only or to the Jews as a people throughout history.

However, Islahi seems to depart from the sense of the parable by applying it directly to the disposition of a certain group of people (*in ki shaklen admiyon ki hai lekin in ki fitrat kuton ki jibillat ke sanche mein dahl chuki hai*, ibid). In short, the Prophet (peace be upon him) is clearly told, according to Islahi, to tell the Quraysh that the Jewish nation is like the dog in the parable (*qaum ka hal suna do*, ibid). This is a warning for the Quraysh that they will suffer the same fate unless they repent. For Islahi, this negative image of the Jews may serve to highlight and illustrate the reverse side of the theme (*‘umud*) of the Surah since he presents the Jews as an example of a nation that is not following the true religion of Abraham.

The Social Context of the Believers

We saw above how Islahi linked the narrative about the way Satan manipulated Adam and Eve with the Quraysh. Even though the Quraysh are not addressed directly in this narrative, Islahi says that a large part of the dialogue is directed to them (*quraysh ki taraf jo is surah mein mukhatab*

⁶⁰ Islahi uses the word *qaum* in reference to various groups of people. In verse 24 of Surah *Al Taubah*, the word *qaum* refers to iniquitous folk (cf. ibid, p. 553). However, in verse 14 of the same Surah, the word *qaum* refers to the Muslims (cf. ibid, p. 547) and in verse 37 it refers to the unbelievers (cf. ibid, p. 572).

hain, ibid, p. 238). Similarly, instead of addressing the believers directly, the Surah refers to them as the “children of Adam” (*bani adam*), a phrase referring not only to Adam’s children but also to all his descendants till the end of the world (*qayamat tak ke liye in ki tamam zuriyat*, ibid, p. 246). Just as some of the children of Adam such as the Quraysh yielded to the tricks of Satan, many others remained firm in their belief. The latter are described in the words of verse 42 as:

those who attain to faith and do righteous deeds – (and) We do not burden any human being with more than he is well able to bear – they are destined for paradise, therein to abide.

Islahi calls these people the “believers” (*ahl iman*, ibid, p. 258), who live according to the theme (*‘umud*) of the Surah: the true religion of Abraham.

Subsequently, the concept of the “believers” is given a more restricted meaning by identifying the believers with the Muslims. Verse 86, for example, warns the people of *Madyan* not to harass the believers:

And do not lie in ambush by every road (that leads to the truth), threatening and trying to turn away from God’s path all who believe in Him, and trying to make it appear crooked.

In his commentary on this verse, however, Islahi refers simply to the Muslims (*koi musulman*, ibid, p. 311). Similarly, with respect to verses 199-202, Islahi states that these verses contain suitable advice for Muslims (*musalmanon ko ba’z munasib-i-waqt hidayat di gayi hain*, ibid, p. 411). Moreover, verse 201 is addressed, through the person of the Prophet, to all Muslims (*khitab . . . tamam musulmanon se hai*, ibid, p. 412).

Another indication that Islahi understands the “believers” in an exclusive way occurs in his commentary on the sentence from verse 46:

And there will be persons who (in life) were endowed with the faculty of discernment (between right and wrong), recognizing each by its mark.⁶¹

Islahi says these people are the *‘ulama* and *fuqaha* of the community (*aisi ‘ulama o fuqaha ya bilfaz digar rijal-i-ummat*, ibid, p. 268). Islahi gives a very specific connotation to the people meant as the “people of discernment” by saying that discernment is the prerogative of the leaders of the community.

⁶¹ Verse 48 is similar:

And they who (in life) had possessed this faculty of discernment will call out to those whom they recognize by their marks (as sinners), saying: “What has your amassing (of wealth) availed you, and all the false pride of your past?”

Different Kinds of Language

An explicit statement of the way the Qur'an presents history or "does history" is provided by Islahi's discussion of verse 59:

Indeed, We sent forth Noah unto his people, and he said: "O my people! Worship God alone: you have no deity other than Him. Verily, I fear lest suffering befall you on an awesome Day!"

Islahi says that the sequence in which history is presented in the Qur'an is in accordance with history (*tartib-i-bayan bilkul tarikhi hai*, ibid, p. 294) though it has the express purpose of communicating guidance. The Qur'an is not a book of history in the ordinary sense of the word since it makes free use of historical evidence to suit its special purpose, which is to warn and to remind people of certain important truths related to the meaning of their lives in the world (*hazrat hud ne qaum ko allah ta'ala ka ehsan bhi yad dilaya hai aur in ko tanbih bhi firmai hai*, ibid, p. 297). Hence, the Qur'an leaves out material that it considers unnecessary. The Qur'an even re-interprets events so as to bring out a specific meaning for believers (*har qaum ki sarguzasht mein se sirf itna hi hissah numayan kiya hai jitna inzar ke maqsud ke lihaz se zaruri tha*, ibid, p. 294).

Islahi says that the history of the Israelites is described in this Surah with some detail (*tafsil ke sath bayan hui hai*, ibid, p. 339) because it is a record of the past (*tarikhi rikard*, ibid) replete with teaching and wisdom (*is sarguzasht ka har hissah apne andar dars-i-mau'zat rakta hai*, ibid). The purpose of providing such a detailed record of the history of the Israelites (*bani israil ki tarikh*, ibid, p. 358) is to demonstrate how the Jews, who were so proud of themselves in the presence of the Prophet Moses, were capable of such perversity (*maqsud is sari tafsil se ye dikana hai ke jo qaum aj apne sharaf o taqaddus par itni nazan hai 'ain apne nabi ki maujudgi mein . . . kiya harkaten kar chuki hai*, ibid, p. 359). The implication is that another nation, like the Quraysh, could do the same thing again at that time or at any subsequent time in history.

Besides the use of figurative language to describe history, there are other ways in which language is used metaphorically in the Surah. Islahi hints that the "barrier" between the inmates of paradise and the inmates of the fire in verse 46 refers to a parable (*tamsil*, ibid, p. 266). Furthermore, from the parable of the rain (*barish ki tamsil*) in verses 57-58, Islahi derives three conclusions, which he calls truths (*haqiqat*, ibid p. 284) and implies that other truths may be contained in this parable (*ek hi barish ki tamsil se kitne*

haqaiq ashkara ho gaye! ibid, p. 285). Islahi describes these truths at length with reference to the *ahadith* (*bukhari o muslim*, ibid, p. 285).

A further significant example of Islahi's understanding of a narrative is his discussion of the encounter between God and the Prophet Moses on the mountain, narrated in verse 143. Islahi expresses the deeper, symbolic purpose of the story by saying that God can be reached only by faith (*khuda . . . sirf 'aql se samajhne aur dil se manane ki chiz hai*, ibid, p. 362). This is the lesson that Moses tried to teach his people (*hazrat musa ne ye sari baten bani israil ko samjhayen*, ibid) but they would not accept his teaching. Islahi recognizes that the purpose of this narrative is the same as the purpose of historical narratives in the Qur'an, namely, to communicate certain truths. He formulates the lessons contained in these narratives to illustrate the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah.

The Appeal to Reason

Islahi introduces Surah Group Two by saying that the nature of the argument in this Surah Group is in accordance with the needs of the addressees who, in this case, are the Quraysh (*khitab ahl makka se hai*, ibid, p. 9). Hence, instead of referring to the former Scriptures, which were unknown to the Quraysh, the arguments used in Surah Group Two are drawn from history (*in ki jani pahchani hui tarikh*) and from nature and reason (*fitrat aur 'aql ki badahat*, ibid, p. 384).

The appeal to reason and nature (*'aql o fitrat*) is a constant theme running through the entire commentary on this Surah. For instance, reason and nature reject all partners for God (*'aql o fitrat ka ek badhi taqaza hai*, ibid, p. 253). It is obvious that placing any partner alongside God would completely upset the system of reason, nature and justice (*nizam 'aql o fitrat aur pure nizam 'adl o qist ko darham barham dena hai*, ibid.).

Furthermore, the Quraysh were warned not to fall into the same trap that Satan prepared for Adam, as described in the opening section of this Surah (cf. ibid, p. 255). Reason would suggest that the descendants of Adam obey the Prophets sent to them (cf. ibid). Even if the Prophets had not appeared to subsequent generations, there would still be abundant evidence from nature (*fitrat*) to justify the need for accountability on the Last Day (cf. ibid, p. 393). Moreover, for Islahi, the primordial covenant between God and man to which verse 172 refers, is evident in the nature (*fitrat*) of every person (*wo to har insan ki fitrat ke andar maujud hai*, ibid, p. 393). Islahi says that

every person with common sense (*salim al fitrat*) will readily acknowledge that the unity of God, as well as accountability on the Last Day and virtue and justice are consistent with man's nature ('*aql o fitrat ki shahadat par mabni*, *ibid*, p. 411).

The Qur'anic View of History

The second aspect of the debate with the Quraysh was based on a view of history according to which an evildoing nation loses its special position (*khilafat*) and is replaced by another nation (*in ki jar kat di hai aur in ki khilafat dusron ko saunpi hai*, *ibid*, p. 281). If the subsequent nation proves to be no better than its predecessor, it will also be destroyed after a certain trial period is over. According to this view of history, the rise and the decline of nations will thus continue throughout time (*jab tak ye dunya qaim hai, barabar jari rahega*, *ibid*, p. 353). Islahi says the Qur'an presents a new approach to history that brings out its ethical dimension, thereby giving history new life (*tarikh ko az sar-i-nau zinda kiya*, *ibid*, p. 286).

Islahi has his own response to the objection that disaster and misfortune is a part of life and should not be explained in terms of God's direct interventions into the natural order. In the words of verse 95, people were saying that:

Misfortune and hardship befell our forefathers as well.

Islahi's response to this objection is that these events are a warning, not a punishment. Hence, disasters affect all people, both the virtuous and the corrupt (*in ka maqsud saza dena nahin*, *ibid*, p. 319). People who respond in faith will understand such events as warnings (*tanbihi masaib*, *ibid*.) and will derive spiritual benefit from them whereas other people, who do not respond in faith, will experience such events as a final act of God (*in par allah ki hujjat tamam ho jati hai*, *ibid*.). They will understand these events as leading to the extermination of unbelievers.⁶²

⁶² Islahi says the same view of history is evident in verse 6 and in verses 42-45 of Surah *Al An'am*. Verse 42 presents the view that God sends "misfortune and hardship so that they might humble themselves". Since they did not learn any lessons from history but regarded these occurrences as the normal pattern of events (*sabaq lene ke bajae in ko ittifaqi hawadash par mahmul kar ke bilkul nazar andaz kar dia*, *ibid*, p. 53), verse 6 says that God "destroyed them for their sins and gave rise to other people in their stead".

Conclusions

Islahi says that, in this Surah, the mood has changed from an invitation to accept the religion of Abraham to that of a warning about the consequences of not doing so. However, there is no objective evidence in the Qur'an or in the Hadiths to support Islahi's statement that the present Surah has changed from invitation to warning. In fact, invitation and warning are two sides of one coin and these two dimensions of the Qur'an cannot be separated in this way. Furthermore, in his introduction Islahi says that this Surah gives a last warning to the Jews. I question whether this is actually the last warning given to the Jews in the Qur'an.

Islahi finds a direct reference to the Jews in verse 176:

Thus, his parable is that of an (excited) dog: if thou approach him threateningly, he will pant with his tongue lolling; and if thou leave him alone, he will pant with his tongue lolling. Such is the parable of those who are bent on giving the lie to Our Messages. Tell (them), then, this story, so that they might take thought.

Islahi makes it quite clear that the parable of the dog in this verse expresses the condition of the Jews (*bilkul yahi hal yahud ka hai*, *ibid*, p. 397), even making a physical comparison (*in ki shaklein admion ki hai lekin in ki fitrat kuton ki jubillat ke sanche mein dahl chuki hai*, *ibid*). Islahi's application of the parable of the dog to the Jews seems to be an expression of his own personal attitude towards the Jews. A parable cannot be restricted to one particular object or group in this way. In short, Islahi uses the parable to confirm his view of the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah.

For Islahi, the historical narrative of verse 168 reinforces this very negative image of the Jews. Islahi says that the verse denies the Jews the status of a group with its own dignity and convictions (*ijtima'e haisiyat se wo in ausaf se mahrum ho chuke the jo ek millet ke haisiyat se in ko dunya mein sar buland rakhne ke lie zaruri thi*, *ibid*, p. 381). Islahi says that, according to verse 103, God dispossessed the Jews of their mandate (*amanat*) to uphold the law. Moreover, Islahi relies on his intuition to conclude that verse 48 of Surah *Al Anfal* describes the propaganda spread by the Jews as the work of Satan (*hamara zahn bar bar is taraf jata hai ke is ke isharah yahud ki taraf*

hai, *ibid*, p. 490). It seems to me that Islahi has given too much weight to his intuition in this matter.⁶³

Moreover, it is not the purpose of an historical narrative in the Qur'an to create a negative image of a particular nation. Hence, these narratives cannot be used to provide information about the character of the Jews as a nation. Islahi says that historical narratives re-interpret events so as to bring out a specific meaning for believers (*har qaum ki sarguzasht mein se sirf itna hi hisah namaya kia hai jitna inzar ke maqsud ke lihaz se zaruri hai*, *ibid*, p. 294). Accordingly, Islahi reads the historical narrative to achieve his own purpose, which is to illustrate what happens to a nation that is not faithful to the religion of Abraham. By limiting the historical narrative to one specific meaning, Islahi can use it to illustrate the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah.

Islahi says that *islam* simply means to believe in God and that Muslims are those who believe in one God like Abraham did. Accordingly, Islahi finds a link between faith and *islam* (*iman o islam*, *ibid*, p. 339 and again in *ibid*, p. 349). Moreover, even before the advent of the Prophet (peace be upon him), Islahi considers the believing people living in *Madyan* to have been "*muslims*" (cf. *ibid*, p. 311). The believer is simply one who responds to the messages of God (*ayat-i-ilahi*, *ibid*, p. 397). On the other hand, Islahi says that verse 46 describes the leaders of the community of Muslims as those endowed with discernment (*rijal-i-ummat*, *ibid*, p. 268). Islahi seems to have excluded the ordinary believers from the faculty of discernment.

Furthermore, Islahi's confidence in human reason leads him to say that every person with common sense (*salim al fitrat*) will readily acknowledge that the unity of God as well as accountability on the Last Day are consistent with man's nature ('*aql o fitrat ki shahadat par mubni*, *ibid*, p. 411). However, Islahi uses concepts like *sunnat-i-ilahi* and *itimam-i-hujjat* to explain events in history. These concepts depend on faith rather than on rational or logical thought. Moreover, only a faith-orientation will accept that the disasters and misfortunes come as a warning (*tanbihi masaib*, *ibid*, p. 319).

⁶³ Neal Robinson agrees that Islahi relies on intuition rather than on formal analysis. He writes: "I find his method too intuitive, and would personally be happier with an analysis which paid closer attention to the formal elements of which the sections of Surahs are composed." Robinson (1996), p. 278.

Islahi's rejection of Marxist and Freudian philosophy, simply because these thinkers do not share his understanding of *fitrat*, seems unjustified (ibid, p. 394-395). It seems to me that modern philosophy (cf. Islahi's new philosophy, *nae filsafi*, ibid, p. 394) on the one hand and a view of history based on faith on the other, are both legitimate responses to different kinds of questions. These separate responses do not necessarily contradict each other but could be complementary.

Surah Al Anfal

Introduction

This Surah is an invitation to the Muslims to be pious, to show brotherly help and solidarity and to prepare themselves for the struggle ahead (*jihad*, vol. 3, p. 419) by their obedience to God and to his Apostle. The ultimate purpose of this invitation is to make the Muslims worthy of being entrusted with the supervision (*amanat o tauliyat*, *ibid*) of the religion of Abraham and of its central symbol, the Inviolable House of Worship, which is about to be taken from the Quraysh and handed over to the Muslims.

In the previous two Surahs of this Surah Group we have seen how the Quraysh showed themselves unworthy of this trust by every aspect of their behaviour (*'aqaid*, *'amal aur akhlaq*, *ibid*). The present Surah focuses on the reform and inner preparedness for the task that is about to be entrusted to the Muslims. The Surah opens by mentioning the weaknesses that some Muslims displayed during the battle of *Badr*. It will be necessary to deal with their lack of trust in God and in his Apostle as well as their weak faith and trust in God (*iman o tawwakul ke munafi*, *ibid*). Next, the Surah highlights the divine help the Muslims received during the battle of *Badr* so that they may deepen their trust in God and prepare themselves for future challenges by being united among themselves. Moreover, the Muslims are encouraged to strive in the way of God for they will soon witness the failure of the intrigues of their enemies, provided they remain firm.

The Quraysh are told to take note of the lessons they were taught during the battle of *Badr* or to expect further humiliation. According to "the way of God" (*sunnat ilahi*, *ibid*), a nation will not be punished as long as the Prophet remains among them. The migration of the Prophet (peace be upon him) has taken away the security the Quraysh were enjoying (*tumhari aman uth chuki hai*, *ibid*) and divine retribution (*'azab-i-ilahi*, *ibid*) could now come at any time. Their pride in attending the Inviolable House of Worship is totally misplaced because they are not worthy of this trust any longer on account of the way they constantly misused the temple that Abraham built. The prayer and worship that they claim to perform is not genuine but has become a joke (*mahz mazaq hai*, *ibid*) and there is great need for reform. They will soon be removed from this sacred place (*haram ki sar zamin*, *ibid*)

and no religion besides the religion of God (*allah ke din ke siwa*, *ibid*) will prevail there any longer.

The Surah proceeds to deal with the objections that the Quraysh were raising after their defeat at *Badr*. Before their defeat, the Quraysh had made fun of the weaknesses of the Muslims but now they began to question the behaviour of the Prophet (peace be upon him) whom they accused of instigating war among his own people, having his own brothers killed, taking them prisoner, holding them to ransom and taking their possessions as plunder. Since such accusations could raise doubts in the hearts of weak-minded people, the Qur'an responds to their questions and promotes collaboration between the *ansar* and the *muhajirin*. The Surah also develops a strategy to defeat unbelief (*kufir ke muqablah mein*, *ibid*).

Islahi says that the above overview of the Surah is sufficient to demonstrate its coherence (*surah ka nizam samajhne ke liye ye ijmalī nazar bhi kafi hai*, *ibid*).

Din as the Religion of Abraham

In the second verse of this Surah, Islahi finds an emphasis on the demands of *din*:

Believers are only they whose hearts tremble with awe whenever God is mentioned, and whose faith is strengthened whenever His messages are conveyed unto them, and who in their Sustainer place their trust.

Believers are those who accept that *din* involves obedience to God's laws (*din o dunya ki fālāh apne rab ke ahkām ki ta'mil hi mein samajhte hain*, *ibid*, p. 432). Moreover, believers do not allow their own preferences and desires to take precedence over "the demands of *din*" (*din ke matalbat*, *ibid*, p. 433). Such demands should be evident to anyone who is sensitive enough to appreciate what *din* is and what it is not (*kiya bat din ki hai, kiya nahin hai*, *ibid*, p. 472). It is not difficult to determine what *din* is not, because any person can notice and feel this (*wo sirf dekh aur sungh hi kar jan jata hai*, *ibid*).

In accordance with Abraham's prayer, God sent the last Prophet (peace be upon him) to restore the original *din* (*asl millet ibrahim*, *ibid*, p. 475), which the Quraysh had disfigured by means of their idol worship (*jinhone millet ibrahim chaur kar din shirk ikhtiyar kar liya tha*, *ibid*). Verse 39 says:

And fight against them until there is no more oppression and all worship is devoted to God alone. And if they desist – behold, God sees all that they do.

According to Islahi, this verse expresses a command given to the Prophet (peace be upon him) and to the Muslims by which they were to exterminate this oppression and eliminate all religion from the holy land of Arabia except the religion of *islam* (*ta ke sar zamin haram par allah ke din ya'ni islam ke siwa jo ibrahim ka din tha koi aur din baqi na rah jaye*, *ibid*). This eventually led to the expulsion of non-Muslim elements from the holy land of Arabia, including the Jews and the Christians (*is tamam 'alaye se ghair muslim 'anasar bedakhil kar diye jayen . . . aur phir bitadrij yahud aur nisara bhi yahan se nikal diye gaye*, *ibid*, p. 476). Islahi seems to be equating *din* with Islam as a religion that is separate from Judaism and Christianity.

The main contention, according to Islahi, concerns the *ka'bah* as the focal point for the faith of Abraham (*khana ka'bah roz-i-awal se millet ibrahim ka markaz hai*, *ibid*). In order to restore this center to its original stature and function, God sent the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) with the true religion (*ta ke is ke hathon allah ka din kamil ho*, *ibid*). In the fight against their enemies, who were also the enemies of God, the Muslims were fighting to establish the religion of God (*allah ke din ke liye*, *ibid*, p. 503). This struggle to establish the religion of God had, as its immediate objective, the removal of the Quraysh (*kuffar quraysh ka tasalat bhi khatam kar dia gaya*, *ibid*, p. 476) because the Quraysh had been untrue to the task of maintaining the shrine of monotheism since the time of Abraham. Its second objective was to create the space and the environment for the restoration of monotheism (*din*) in and around the *ka'bah*.

Islam as the Religion of Abraham

After the victory of *Badr*, the Muslims in Medina were faced with issues they had not had occasion to deal with before. One of these issues was the proper disposal of the plunder collected after their victory at *Badr*. In his commentary on the first verse of this Surah, Islahi looks for ways to express the changed circumstances in which the Muslims now found themselves. Perhaps for this reason he no longer translates the Arabic word for the believers (*al muminun*) as “the believers” but as “the Muslims”. In addition, Islahi now begins to highlight the evidence of organization and unity among Muslims by referring to “Islamic society” (*islami mu'shara*) and to the

Muslims as a group or collectivity (*musalman bahaisiyat majmu'i*, ibid, p. 429) as well as to the social organization that began to appear among the Muslims (*musalmanon ki ijtimai shirazahbandi*, ibid, p. 430). These terms express the new situation in Medina, which obviously demanded a creative adaptation to the new social and political realities. The surrender to God of *islam* according to the faith of Abraham (*millet-i-ibrahim*) could be maintained in the new situation provided new ways were found to give expression to it.

Yet verses 2-4 are reminders of the essentials of the true faith. Islahi drops his reference to "the Muslims" and adopts a word that would seem to be wider in scope, namely, "the believers" (*ahl-i-iman*, ibid, p. 431). Throughout his discussion of this Surah, however, Islahi uses both these terms (namely, "the Muslims" and "the believers") inter-changeably, as if they were identical in meaning and could designate the same group of people. Verse 5, for instance, refers to "the believers" but Islahi refers repeatedly to "the Muslims" (*musalman*, ibid, p. 435).

I detect another apparent shift in focus in Islahi's understanding of the word "messages" in verse 2:

Believers are only they whose hearts tremble with awe whenever God is mentioned, and whose faith is strengthened whenever His messages are conveyed unto them, and who in their Sustainer place their trust.

In the last Surah, Islahi said that God's "messages" (*ayat-i-ilahi*) referred to the abundant evidence in the world of nature that point to a Creator and a Sustainer. Now, in this Surah, God's "messages" (*allah ki ayat*) are a reference to God's laws and demands (*allah ki ayat . . . se murad khuda ke ahkam aur us ke qawanin hain*, ibid, p. 431). Islahi even finds an allusion to the *shari'ah* in the reference to God's "messages" (*goya puri shari'ah iman hi ka mazhar aur in ke mazmarat ki tafsil hai*, ibid, p. 432). The "messages" of God are the demands of true faith (*iman ke maqtadiyat o matalbat*, ibid).

Islahi claims that this new understanding of God's messages is justified because of the context (*qarina dalil hai*, ibid, p. 431), which required laws and regulations for the new situation in which the Muslims found themselves. In fact, Islahi states that the Muslims were now a separate community because of the new direction of prayer that had been given to them (*tumhare qibla ko ahl kitab ke qibla se alag kar ke khuda ne tum ko ek 'alahda ummat ki haisiyat se mumtaz kar dia*, ibid, p. 434). Islahi interprets verse 11 according to the new social context of the Muslims:

(He) sent down upon you water from the skies, so that the He might purify you thereby and free you from Satan's unclean whisperings and strengthen your hearts and thus make firm your steps.

Islahi says the verse is a reference to the ritual cleansing (*wuzu*), which had now become the normal practice of the new community of Muslims (*wuzu kaise hoga*, *ibid*, p. 447).

It seems clear, therefore, that this Surah describes the new political, social and religious situation of the Muslim community, a community, which was now encouraged to confront the Quraysh, as verse 39 says:

And fight against them until there is no more oppression and all worship is devoted to God alone.

Islahi heralds the victory of Islam and the Muslims (*islam aur musalmanon ke kamil ghalib*, *ibid*, p. 466), identifying Islam with the religion of *din* (*din ya'ni islam ke siwa jo ibrahim ka dia tha koi aur din baqi na rah jaye*, *ibid*, p. 475). It is remarkable that Islahi does not hesitate to identify the pure self-surrender of Abraham with the religious laws and practices of a particular community of Muslim believers whom Islahi himself describes as "weak" (*kamzor qism ke musalmanon*, *ibid*, p. 429).⁶⁴ Although the new community of Muslims professed the religion of *din*, surely its members continued to show many weaknesses. Consequently Islam, the name given to the new community of Muslims with their new laws and practices, cannot simply be identified with the *din* of the Prophet Abraham.

It is also remarkable that verse 34 does not proclaim *the Muslims* as the guardians of the Inviolable House of Worship, but rather that:

None but the God-conscious can be its guardians.

Only those persons who follow the religion of Abraham can guard the sacred place (*jo asl din-i-ibrahimi ke hamil hain*, *ibid*, p. 470). Islahi says that it is the Muslims, as a group, who follow this *din* (*ye isharah musalmanon ki taraf hai*, *ibid*). However, Islahi knows that the promise made to Abraham was valid only for those descendants of Abraham who were faithful, for God says in verse 124 of Surah *Al Baqarah*:

My covenant does not embrace the evil-doers.

The inheritors of the trust given to Abraham were only those among his descendants who professed the unity of God (*sirf wo log honge jo allah ki*

⁶⁴ Islahi also refers to the weakness of some members of the new community of believers in his comment on the last phrase in verse 13 of Surah *Al Taubah*: "Nay, it is God alone of whom you ought to stand in awe, if you are (truly) believers" (*khitab agar che 'am hai lekin rue sakhan khas taur par kamzaaron aur munafik qism ke logon ki taraf hai*, *ibid*, p. 546).

tauhid par qaim rahne wale, ibid, p. 470). Membership of the new community of Muslims would not automatically entitle a person to be a guardian of the Inviolable House of Worship. For, among the believers, there were many hypocrites whose faith was purely an external affair (*qanuni iman*, ibid, p. 434).

The Social Context of the Quraysh

As in the previous Surah, Islahi presents the Quraysh as the main object of many verses in this Surah as well. For example, verse 7 is a reference to the battle of Badr:

And, lo, God gave you the promise that one of the two (enemy) hosts would fall to you: and you would have liked to seize the less powerful one, whereas it was God's will to prove the truth to be true in accordance with His words, and to wipe out the last remnant of those who denied the truth.

Islahi says the phrase: "the last remnant of those who denied the truth" is a reference to the Quraysh (*sari kufr ki jar to quraysh ki jam'iyat thi*, ibid, p. 439). Similarly, verse 14 is addressed to the Quraysh (*quraysh ko mukhatab kar ke*, ibid, p. 450):

This (for you, o enemies of God)! Taste it, then, (and know) that suffering through fire awaits those who deny the truth!

Without taking note of the disagreement among scholars concerning the true addressee of verse 19, Islahi categorically states that it is addressed to the Quraysh (*is ayat mein barah-i-rast quraysh ko mukhatab kar liya gaya tha*, ibid, p. 452).⁶⁵

Furthermore, Islahi says that verse 35:

Taste then, (O unbelievers) this chastisement as an outcome of your persistent denial of the truth!

is addressed to the Quraysh since the verses surrounding it refer to events associated with the Quraysh (*quraysh ko mukhatab kar ke*, ibid, p. 473).⁶⁶ Moreover, the pronouns "they" and "them" of verses 38-40 also refer to the Quraysh (cf. ibid, pp. 474-476):

Tell those who are bent on denying the truth that if they desist, all that is past shall be forgiven them; but if they revert (to their wrongdoing), let them remember what happened to the like of them in times gone

⁶⁵ Muhammad Asad discusses the disagreement among scholars "as to whether this verse is addressed to the believers or to their opponents at *Badr*, that is, the pagan Quraysh." Asad (1980), p. 241, footnote 21.

⁶⁶ The words: "those who are bent on denying the truth" of verse 36 also describe the Quraysh (cf. ibid).

by. And fight against them until there is no more oppression and all worship is devoted to God alone.

Similarly, verse 47 also refers to the Quraysh as “those (unbelievers)”:

And be not like those (unbelievers) who went forth from their homelands full of self-conceit and a desire to be seen and praised by men.

Islahi concludes from the immediate context of the verses (*jaise ke ham pichhe isharah kar aye hain*, *ibid*, p. 489) that it refers to the Quraysh (“*kallazina*” *se isharah quraysh ki taraf hai*, *ibid*).

Islahi applies the second sentence of verse 67 to the Quraysh for different reasons:

You may desire the fleeting gains of this world.

Islahi says that these words could not possibly apply to the Prophet or to the Muslims (cf. *ibid*, p. 511). Islahi explains that the style of speech in the Qur’an is similar to the style of an orator who modifies his address according to his audience (*quran mein khitab ka andaz . . . bilkul isi tarah ka hota hai jo ek a’la khatib taqrir mein ikhtiyar karta hai*, *ibid*, p. 511). Hence, a change of addressee occurs within verse 67 so that the second part is addressed to the Quraysh and refers to the propaganda in which they were engaged (*ye khitab quraysh se hai aur ye in ke is propaganda ka jawab dia ja raha hai*, *ibid*).

Finally, Islahi recognizes the disagreement that exists with regard to the correct addressee for verse 68:

Had it not been for a decree from God that had already gone forth, there would indeed have befallen you a tremendous chastisement on account of all (the captives) that you took.

On the basis of the opportunity for reform that God provides for every nation (*allah ne chunke har ummat ke liye ek waqt muqarrar kar rakha hai, jis se pahle kisi qaum ka faislah nahin hota is wajh se us ne tumhen muhlat de di*, *ibid*, p. 512), Islahi argues that this verse could only apply to the Quraysh who were still awaiting their fate.⁶⁷

The Social Context of the Jews

The pattern of the Jewish nation’s total unworthiness to exercise the mandate given to them by God is brought out by Islahi with almost shocking clarity

⁶⁷ Other scholars claim that this verse refers to the Muslims. Muhammad Asad discusses these views in his comments on verse 68. Cf. Asad (1980), p. 251, footnote 73.

when he applies the work of Satan, as described in verse 48, to that of the Jews:

And, lo, Satan made all their doings seem goodly to them, and said, "No one can overcome you this day, for behold, I shall be your protector!"

The connection between the propaganda spread by the Jews with the work of Satan seems to be based on intuition rather than on fact (*hamara zahin bar bar is taraf jata hai ke is ke isharah yahud ki taraf hai*, ibid, p. 490). Islahi finds confirmation for this point of view in the biography of the Prophet (*sirat o maghazi ki kitabon se bhi aur quran ke isharat se bhi ma'lum hota hai ke yahud sharu' hi se an hazrat salla allahu alayhi wa sallam ki da'wat se khaif they*, ibid). Islahi goes on to explain in detail how the Jews worked for the downfall of the Prophet (peace be upon him) since this was their heartfelt wish (*yahud . . . dil se chahte they ke quraysh muhammad salla allahu alayhi wa sallam aur ap ke sahiyon ko khatam kar den*, ibid, 492). In his discussion of verses 55-58, Islahi constantly speaks disapprovingly of the Jews (*ab ye yahud aur in qabail ke bab mein hidayat di ja rahi hai*, ibid, p. 498).

The Social Context of the Believers

Even though the first thirty verses of this Surah address "the believers" with the expression: "you who have attained to faith", Islahi applies this form of address to the Muslims. Since Islahi is constantly referring to the Muslims, one could get the impression that the main concern of the Surah is to address the members of the Muslim community whereas the first verse is an exhortation for "believers":

They will ask thee about the spoils of war. Say: "All spoils of war belong to God and the Apostle." Remain, then, conscious of God, and keep alive the bonds of brotherhood among yourselves, and pay heed unto God and His Apostle, if you are (truly) believers!

Islahi says this verse addresses the Muslims as an organized community (*musalmanon ki ijtimai shirazabandi*, ibid, p. 430). He does not allude to the fact that many diverse groups existed within this community at the time of revelation.

Islahi says that the Muslims formed a separate society (*khuda ne tum ko ek 'alahda ummat ki haisiyat se mumtaz kar dia*, ibid, p. 434). However, verse 10 is directed to the believers who would come after the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him) – not only for the Muslims at the time of revelation

(*nabi ki ghair maujudgi mein ya is ke zamane ke ba'd ke log kis tarah itminan-i-qalb hasil kar sakte they*, *ibid*, p. 444). So the verse embraces all believers (*isi mauqa' ke liye nahin tha balke ahl iman ke liye*, *ibid*.)

Islahi explains the Surah according to the specific situation of the Muslims at the time of the battle of *Badr* (*jaise ke is mauqa' par musalmanon ko la haq rahi ho gayi*, *ibid*, p. 445) and according to the kind of warfare that was customary at that time (*is daur ki jang mein jis mein kamyabi ka inhisar mashino ki quwwat par nahin*, *ibid*, 448). In the context of the battle of *Badr*, Islahi refers to the Muslims as the opponents of the Quraysh (cf. *ibid*, p. 449) even though the Qur'an does not describe the conflict in these terms. In the midst of the battle, for instance, verse 12 addresses "those who believe":

Lo! Thy Sustainer inspired the angels (to convey this His message to the believers): "I am with you!"

(And He commanded the angels:) "And give firmness unto those who have attained to faith (with these words from Me): 'I shall cast terror into the hearts of those who are bent on denying the truth; strike, then, their necks, (O believers,) and strike off every one of their fingertips!'"

In his comment on this verse, Islahi does not refer to the Muslims but refers simply to "the believers" (*ahl iman*, *ibid*). Yet he reverts to speaking of the Muslims in the discussion that follows (cf. *ibid*.) and states that verse 17 is addressed explicitly to the Muslims (*khitab 'am musalmanon se hai*, *ibid*, p. 451):

And yet (O believers), it was not you who slew the enemy, but it was God who slew them.

Islahi finds it necessary to explain that the following verses, namely verses 15-16, provide guidance for Muslims engaged in the kind of war that was customary at that time (*yahan ayat mein zer-i-bahas wohi munazzam fauj kashi wali surat hai*, *ibid*, p. 450). He states that the verses do not apply to the subsequent guerilla type of warfare that is now common (cf. *ibid*). The guidance provided by verses 15-16 is meant for conventional warfare (*ab ye musalmanon ko ayinda pesh ane wali jangon se muta'lluq hidayat di ja rahi hai*, *ibid*). Moreover, Islahi states that verse 25 is meant for the whole of society at that time (*ye khitab pure mu'sharen se 'umuman aur in logon se khususan . . .*" *ibid*, p. 459). Similarly, verse 26 describes the historical context when the Muslims were indeed few in number:

And remember the time when you were few (and) helpless on earth, fearful lest people do away with you.

Islahi assumes that the pronoun “you” in this verse applies to the Muslims without the need for any further investigation (cf. *ibid*, p. 460).

In the same vein, Islahi says verse 29 is a promise given to the Muslims (*is ayat mein musalmanon se ye wa'da kiya ja ra ha hai*, *ibid*, p. 466):

O you who have attained to faith! If you remain conscious of God, He will endow you with a standard by which to discern the true from the false, and will efface your bad deeds, and will forgive you your sins: for God is limitless in His great bounty.

Verse 47, directed to the Quraysh, is also a message to the Muslims. In the words of the verse, the Quraysh “were trying to turn others away from the path of God”. Here the “others” are the Muslims, not only the Muslims living at that time but also those not yet living (*ayinda musalmanon ke samne aise halat ane wale hai*, *ibid*, p. 489).⁶⁸

In the context of the battle of *Badr*, verse 60 tells “the believers” to prepare for war:

Hence, make ready against them whatever force and war mounts you are able to muster, so that you might deter thereby the enemies of God, who are your enemies as well, and other besides them of whom you may be unaware, (but) of whom God is aware; and whatever you may expend in God’s cause shall be repaid to you in full, and you shall not be wronged.

For Islahi, this is a verse for the Muslims (*is ayat mein musalmanon ko ye hidayat ki ja rahi hai*, *ibid*, p. 503). The only aspect that Islahi considers necessary to adapt to modern conditions is the reference to “war mounts”. Whereas the Muslim armies were using horses, modern armies use tanks and airplanes (*us zamane ki jang mein ghoron ko wohi ehmiyat hasil thiy jo is zamane mein tank aur hawai jahaz ko hasil hai*, *ibid*). Islahi identifies four kinds of enemies for the Muslims of that period, namely the Quraysh, the Jews, the Arab tribes who had broken their agreements with the Muslims and the hypocrites (cf. *ibid*). Islahi is aware that the Muslims will have enemies in the future but is content to mention this reality only in passing (*in dushmanon ki taraf bhi ek isharah kar dia jo mustaqbil qarib ya mustaqbil*

⁶⁸ Islahi makes a reference to international relations based on the phrase from verse 62: “God is enough for thee”. Islahi says that people of faith can rely on God in every aspect and in every domain of life (*maidan-i-jang mein bhi ahl iman ki quwwat aur bain al aqwami ma'amalat mein bhi ahl iman ki pusht panah hai*, *ibid*, p. 505).

ba'id ke pardon mein chupe hue hai, ibid, p. 504). Islahi focuses on the Muslims at the time of revelation in order to confirm the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah, which is a call to accept Islam as the religion of Abraham.

Different Kinds of Language

Verse 42 states that the battle of *Badr* was brought about for the express purpose that:

God might accomplish a thing (which He willed) to be done, (and) that he who would perish might perish in clear evidence of the truth, and that he who would remain alive might live in clear evidence of the truth.

Islahi takes the verse as a reference to the vindication of truth and the destruction of all that is false (*haq ka haq hona aur batil ka batil hona wazeh kar de*, ibid, p. 484). Accordingly, Islahi has adopted a figurative or metaphorical interpretation (*halakat aur zindagi se murad zahir hai ke yaha rohani o ma'nwi halakat aur zindagi hai*, ibid.). Islahi's interpretation, in this case, lends itself more easily to the symbolic significance of the battle of *Badr* as a vindication of the believers' faith in God's assistance.

Similarly, Islahi explains that the dream of the Prophet (peace be upon him), in which the Quraysh appear as few in number, is another example of a metaphorical figure of speech. As verse 43 says:

Lo! God showed them to thee in a dream as few.

The dream does not represent a contradiction of reality but is an expression of the truth in metaphorical language (*kabih koi haqiqat mujaz ke labas mein zahir hoti hai*, ibid, p. 485). It also sometimes happens that, rather than repeating something that is already obvious to everyone, its meaning or significance is brought out instead (*kisi she ke zahir ke bajae is ki ma'nwi haqiqat kisi piraya mein dikayi jati hai*, ibid.). The dream makes the ethical or moral opposition of the Quraysh seem insignificant (*ma'nwi aur ahlaqi 'itibar se is ki haisiyat bahut kam thiy*, ibid.). Although only the Prophet (peace be upon him) sees the dream, all Muslims are included in the response (*is ke rad-i-'amal ke zikr mein tamam musalmanon ko shamil kar liya hai*, ibid, p. 486). Islahi states that even believers living today can share in the courage and conviction that the Prophet's dream bestowed on believers at that moment (*aj bhi har shakhs is ka tajarba kar sakta hai*, ibid, p. 487).

Finally, verses 72-75 repeatedly refer to the concept of *hijrah*, a word that can have both the physical sense of migration as well as the more spiritual sense of “forsaking the domain of evil” according to Muhammad Asad’s translation of the word. Islahi prefers the physical sense of the word, stating that a believer who refuses to emigrate (unless there is a good reason for him not to do so) should be considered a hypocrite (*jin logon ne iman ke da’we ke bawajud, akhir tak bila kisi ‘azr ma’qul ke hijrat se grez ikhtiyar kiya, in ka shumar munafikin ke zimren mein hua*, *ibid*, p. 519). Islahi’s rendition of *hijrah*, as well as the concepts he uses for those Muslims living amongst the unbelievers (*dar al kufr ke musalmanon*, *ibid*) and those Muslims who have migrated to live among other Muslims (*dar al islam ke musalmanon*, *ibid*) identify Muslims according to physical and geographical categories that form part of the traditional language of Islam.

Conclusions

In his introduction to this Surah, Islahi says that a nation will not be punished as long as their Prophet remains with them. However, the people of the Prophet Noah as well as the people of the Prophet Lot were punished while their Prophet was with them – though the Prophet concerned was saved in each case. His further statement that their prayer and worship had become a joke (*mahz mazaq*, *ibid*, p. 419) is exaggerated because the peoples' prayer had deteriorated without becoming a joke. Moreover, Islahi claims that, according to verse 39, the Muslims were to eliminate all religion from the land of Arabia except the religion of Islam. However, non-Muslims were expelled only from the sanctuary of Mecca and not from the land of Arabia according to verse 6 in Surah *At Taubah*:

And if any of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside God seeks thy protection, grant him protection, so that he might (be able to) hear the word of God (from thee); and thereupon convey him to a place where he can feel secure: this, because they (may be) people who (sin only because they) do not know (the truth).

Furthermore, Islahi implies that only the Prophet (peace be upon him) experienced the dream mentioned in verse 43. However, the Muslims and their opponents shared the dream as well.

Moreover, it is unfair of Islahi to apply the work of Satan in verse 48 to the Jews. It would have been more honest to admit that all religious communities are subject to Satan's influence.

Islahi's references to the demands of *din* (*din ke mutalbat*, *ibid*, p. 433) reflect the changed social and political situation of the Muslim community in Medina. In the previous Surah, Islahi said that God's messages (*ayat-i-ilahi*) are an expression of the abundant evidence in the world of nature that points to the Sustainer of the world. Now, in this Surah, God's messages (*allah ki ayat*) represent God's laws (*khuda ke ahkam aur us ke qawanin hain*, *ibid*, p. 431). There is also a shift in Islahi's use of the word *din*, which is now understood in terms of the geographical area that must be conquered by the Muslim community so that God's religion (*allah ke din*) might prevail over all other religions in the land (*islam aur musalmanon ke kamil ghalib*, *ibid*, p. 466). Besides being the attitude of total surrender to God that Abraham showed, *din* now expresses the system of laws and ordinances (*shari'ah*)

that excludes certain other religions from its area of jurisdiction (*koi aur din baqi na rah jaye*, *ibid*, p. 475).

Islahi sees the direction of prayer (*qibla*) and ablutions (*wuzu*) as signs that the Muslims were now a separate community (*ek 'alahda ummat*, *ibid*, p. 434). However, the Muslim community was not formed as a separate community by the installation of the direction of prayer. The Muslims were a separate community in Mecca for thirteen years and in Medina for another two years before the change in the direction of prayer was revealed. Contrary to Islahi's assertions, the Muslims became a separate community by obeying the Prophet (peace be upon him) and not because of *qibla* or *wuzu*.

Islahi stresses the specific context in which the Muslims organized themselves as a community (*musalmanon ki ijtimai shirazabandi*, *ibid*, p. 430) and formed a separate society (*'alahda ummat*, *ibid*, p. 434). At the same time, however, he says that verse 10 is meant also for those living after the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him) (*nabi ki ghair maujudgi mein ya is ke zamane ke ba'd ke log*, *ibid*, p. 444). Likewise, while verses 15-16 refer only to the kind of warfare that was common at that time (cf. *ibid*, p. 450), verse 25 is meant for the whole of society at that time (*ye khitaab pure mu'sharen se 'umuman aur in logon se khususan*, *ibid*, p. 459). Islahi mentions both the specific and the wider context. In this instance, he does make an effort to move beyond the specific context to provide a more universal meaning for the Surah.

It seems to me that Islahi has allowed the original *din* of Abraham (*asl din-i-ibrahimi*, *ibid*, p. 470) to develop and change according to the demands of the new situation of the Muslims. Hence, Islahi cannot claim, as he does in his discussion of Surah *Al Maidah*, that *din* does not change (*jahan tak din ke haqiqat ka ta'lluq hai wo hamesha se ghair mutaghayyar hain aur ghair mutaghayyar hi rahenge*, vol. 2, p. 535). The *shari'ah* gives expression to the "truths of *din*" (*din ke haqiqat*) and God revealed the *shari'ah* in the new circumstances of the Muslim community. Islahi's conclusion is that Abraham's perfect expression of faith (*asl din-i-ibrahimi*) and the *shari'ah* that found shape in the socio-political circumstances of the Muslim community in Medina both express one and the same *din*. Islahi himself says that these socio-political circumstances have since changed. Hence, one must conclude that *din* cannot be tied to these specific circumstances but

can exist in different contexts throughout history. However, Islahi does not avert to this fact.

The verses of this Surah constantly refer to those who believe and have faith. Islahi, on the other hand, refers repeatedly to “the Muslims”. Since it is clear that “the Muslims” include those who have the original faith of Abraham (*asl din-i-ibrahimi*, ibid, p. 470) in their hearts and express it in their lives, a more accurate way to refer to them may be as “*muslims*”. At times, Islahi uses the words “the believers” (*ahl iman*) to convey a much more inclusive concept. For example, verse 62 allows him to make an observation about international relations (cf. ibid, p. 505). In his concern to identify the correct addressees of the verses, however, Islahi usually describes members of Islamic society at the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him) as “the Muslims” as a separate group. It seems to me that the constant identification of the specific addressees of these verses as “the Muslims” has prevented Islahi from bringing out the more universal message of the Qur’an.⁶⁹

The metaphorical or symbolical explanation of some significant events brings out their universal significance. For example, the battle of *Badr* is a vindication of truth over falsity (*haq ka haq hona aur batil ka batil hona wazeh kar de*, ibid, p. 484). Islahi says that verse 42 expresses the spiritual meaning of the battle of *Badr* (*halakat aur zindagi se murad zahir hai ke yaha rohani o ma'nwi halakat aur zindagi hai*, ibid). Similarly, the dream of the Prophet (peace be upon him) is an expression of truth in metaphorical language (*majaz ke labas mein*, ibid, p. 485). Rather than simply describing the dream as an event, the verse brings out its deeper significance (*kisi she ke zahir ke bajae is ki ma'nwi haqiqat kisi piraya mein dikaya jati hai*, ibid). While recognizing these examples of symbolic meanings, however, Islahi prefers the physical and geographical categories of *hijrah*, *dar al kufr* and *dar al islam* to convey the specific aspects of Islamic society as it existed at that time.

⁶⁹ Esack also prefers the term “muslim” rather than “the Muslims”. He writes: ‘He named you muslims before this and here’, says the Qur’an (Q. 22.78). Thus ‘muslim’ is also a label, a form of identity. However, the Qur’an also refers to ‘muslims’ before the Prophet (peace be upon him). In other words, there is an entity called muslim outside the group of people who followed the Prophet, for the word refers to anyone, or indeed, anything that submits to the will of Allah. Regrettably though, rather than describing a person with certain characteristics, the term now only refers to a certain social group, a group that views itself as the chosen of Allah.” Esack, (2000), p. 138.

Surah At Taubah

Introduction

The fact that the customary *bismi allah* is omitted at the opening of this Surah indicates the close affinity as well as the separation between the subject matter of Surah *At Taubah* and its predecessor, Surah *Al Anfal* (*'umud o mazmun ke lihaz se nihayat gahra ittisal bhi hai aur maqsud o ghayat ke 'itibar se fil jumlah infisal bhi*, vol. 3, p. 523). Whereas Surah *Al Anfal* was addressed to the Muslims, the present Surah is addressed to the unbelievers, the People of the Book and the hypocrites. The previous Surah consisted of preparations for war while the present Surah lays down an ultimatum for the Quraysh (*ultimatum aur 'elan-i-jang*, *ibid*) who, in the words of Mir, “must choose between Islam and war”⁷⁰.

The two aspects of unity and separation (*ishtarak o infisal*) were kept distinct by divine ordinance (*mumayyaz karne ke liye hikmat ilahi muqtazi hui*, *ibid*). As a result, the present Surah cannot be seen as totally separate from the previous Surah but, nevertheless, has its own separate identity. The absence of the customary *bismi allah* brings out these two aspects of the Surah with one stroke. Introducing a Surah with *bismi allah* serves to indicate a boundary between one Surah and the Surah preceding it. Without this boundary, the two Surahs become connected in their meaning (*ma'nwi ittisal*, *ibid*). While this is the case between Surah *At Taubah* and Surah *Al Anfal*, the appearance of *At Taubah* as a separate Surah with its own name (*'alahda wujud*, *ibid*) indicates its distinctive character (*imtiyazi khususiyat*, *ibid*).

Din as the Religion of Abraham

With regard to the establishment of *din*, Surah *At Taubah* follows the same approach as the previous Surah. Islahi says that, according to Abraham's prayer, the holy land will be purified of all unbelief and *shirk* so that the religion of truth might prevail (*din-i-haq ke siwa koi aur din yahan din ghalib ki haisiyat se baqi na rahe*, *ibid*, p. 564). As verse 33 says:

⁷⁰ Mir (1983), p. 142.

He it is who has sent forth His Apostle with the (task of spreading) guidance and the religion of truth, to the end that He may cause it to prevail over all (false) religion.⁷¹

Islahi describes the *din* of the Muslim community as the only true *din* and considers it separate from the *din* of other communities. Before their victory over the Quraysh, the Muslims lived as a minority community among several other religious groups in Mecca. However, in his introduction to the present Surah, Islahi refers to the various other groups that existed in Medinan society as the enemies of the Muslims (*musalmanon ke khule ya chupe dushman*, *ibid*, p. 524)⁷² and he draws divisions between these communities on the basis of *din*, which has the effect of isolating the Muslim community from these other groups. After the victory over the Quraysh, the *ka'bah* became the center of worship and a source of light and guidance for all believers (*tamam 'alam ke liye hidayat aur raushni ka sarchashma ban jaye*, *ibid*, p. 564). Islahi makes this light and guidance depend on the victory of the Muslims over their enemy, the Quraysh.

The Development of Islam

In this Surah, Islahi gives the impression that Islamic society was well organized and well prepared for war. Verse 5 says:

And so, when the sacred months are over, slay those who ascribe divinity to aught beside God wherever you may come across them and take them captive and besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every conceivable place. Yet if they repent, and take to prayer, and render the purifying dues, let them go their way: for, behold, God is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace.

Islahi comments that a person entering Islam (as a separate religion) must take part in its structured pattern of worship (*namaz aur zakat ek jam'a ta'bir hai islam ke nizam 'ibadat o ata't mein dakhil hone ki*, *ibid*, p. 540). In fact, Islahi presents the choice as a very stark one between Islam and the sword (*ya to islam qabul karen ya talwar*, *ibid*, p. 540).

In his commentary on this verse, Islahi says that the Muslim community had reached a very crucial point in its struggle with the Quraysh. Islahi repeats that the only option in these circumstances was the choice between conversion to Islam or execution (*wo islam qabul karta hai ya talwar*, *ibid*,

⁷¹ A similar idea is expressed in verse 193 of Surah *Al Baqarah* and in verse 39 of Surah *Al Anfal*.

⁷² Islahi refers to the "enemies of Islam" (*islam dushmani*) again later in this Surah (cf. *ibid*, p. 606).

p. 541). Islahi is saying, in effect, that the phrase from verse 5: “if they repent, and take to prayer, and render the purifying dues”, which occurs again in verse 11, provides the criteria by which to judge whether a person has embraced Islam and should thus be exempt from execution. However, by stressing such external criteria, Islahi equates *islam*, as the “religion of Abraham”, with *Islam* understood as the doctrines, laws and practices of the Muslim community during the period of revelation.

It is significant that Islahi does not refer to *islam* but to *din* when he describes the victory of truth (*din haq ke siwa koi aur din yahan din ghalib ki haisiyat se baqi na rahe*, *ibid*, p. 564). Indeed, Islahi returns to the language of *din* to explain the pre-eminence of true religion, according to verse 33:

He it is who has sent forth His Apostle with the (task of spreading) guidance and the religion of truth, to the end that He may cause it to prevail over all (false) religion – however hateful this may be to those who ascribe divinity to aught beside God.

Perhaps the verse is referring to the presence both of *din* understood as the surrender of oneself to God as well as to the victory of Islam as a separate religion with its doctrines, laws and practices. Islahi brings together various aspects of *din* and several aspects of Islam (*da'wat din, aqamat din, ta'lim din aur jihad fi sabil l'llah*, *ibid*, p. 566) – under the umbrella of an Islamic society (*islami mu'shara*, *ibid*, p. 567) led by an Islamic government (*hukumat*, *ibid*). It seems that the Quraysh were protesting against Islam as a political and social force and not only against *din* as the religion of their ancestor Abraham. The Jews had a similar reaction to the ascendancy of the Muslims.⁷³

This shift in focus between *islam* and *Islam* continues throughout Islahi's commentary on this Surah. Verse 36 describes the four sacred months within the lunar calendar as *ad dinu al qayimu* or “the ever-true law (of God)”⁷⁴. Islahi links *din* with the natural environment (*jis tarah islam din qayim hai is liye ke is ki shahadat afaq o anfus mein maujud hai isi tarah ye qamri jantri asl dini jantri hai*, *ibid*, p. 570) and says that the natural order is an important aspect of *din* (*ye bhi din hi ka ek hissah aur nihayat hi aham*

⁷³ Islahi mentions the Jews' dissatisfaction with the Muslims' ascendancy in his discussion of Surah *Al Baqarah* (cf. vol. 1, p. 297). He brings out the same point in his discussion of verse 27 of Surah *Al Maidah* where he connects the narrative of Cain and Abel directly with the jealousy that the Jews felt towards the Muslims because of their growing power and sovereignty (cf. vol. 2, p. 495).

⁷⁴ This phrase occurs also in verse 161 of Surah *Al An'am* (cf. *ibid*, p. 210).

hissah hai, ibid, p. 570). *Din* cannot change because of the close link between *din* and nature (*is mein koi taghayyar o tabdil karna din mein tahrif ke ham ma'ni hai*, ibid).

However, changes in the laws and practices of the Muslim community were essential so that the Muslim community could counteract the clever manipulation of the hypocrites (*munaḥḥikin . . . islam aur musulmanon ko nuḥḥsan pahunchane ke liye aisi aisi chalen*, ibid, pp. 601-602). Moreover, Islam engaged in certain political maneuvers so that its potential enemies “whose hearts are to be won over” (verse 60) would remain on the side of the Islamic government (*ta ke in ki hamdardiyan islam ke dushmanon ke bajae islami hukumat ke sath rahe. ye ek politikal musaraf hai*, ibid, p. 592). Furthermore, the various groups existing within the society of Medina, mentioned in verse 60, would be financially supported by offerings given for the sake of God (*sadaqat*). The specific context of Medina provides evidence about these groups (*kalam ka mauqa' o mahal khud shahid hai*, ibid, p. 592). In other words, the context of the Muslim community in Medina was not the same as the social context during the time of the Prophet Abraham. In conclusion, perhaps *din* cannot change because it is linked with nature but it is clear that Islam does change since it responds creatively to the changing environment.

It seems, therefore, that Islahi’s discussion of this Surah has gradually moved away from understanding *islam* simply as the pure self-surrender to God exemplified by the Prophet Abraham and has shifted increasingly in the direction of the visible confrontation between the Muslim community and the Quraysh, who are described as “the enemies of Islam” (*islam ke dushmanon*, ibid, p. 642). The struggle between truth and falsehood was a characteristic of the life of the Prophet Abraham and of all the Prophets. Now, during the life of the last Prophet (peace be upon him), this struggle takes on the social, political and even military dimensions that were demanded by the very different historical context of Medinan society.

The Specific Context of the Hypocrites

Most of the references to the hypocrites appear in the context of the expedition to *Tabuk* and describe the attitudes and inner motivations of these hypocrites, without addressing them directly. As verse 67 says:

They are oblivious of God, and so He is oblivious of them. Verily, the hypocrites – it is they, they who are truly iniquitous.

Moreover, the last part of verse 68 says:

God has rejected them and long-lasting suffering awaits them.

Again, verse 70 ends by saying:

It was not God who wronged them (by His punishment), but it was they who wronged themselves.

Islahi concludes from these verses that God rejects the hypocrites (*in ko nazar andaz aur taufiq khair se mahrum kar deta hai*, *ibid*, p. 603) though it is clear that the hypocrites bring this situation upon themselves by their own behaviour. Furthermore, Islahi finds a categorical rejection of the hypocrites in verse 73:

O Prophet! Strive hard against the deniers of the truth and the hypocrites, and be adamant with them. And (if they do not repent) their goal shall be hell – and how vile a journey's end!

Likewise, these words from verse 74 express a denial of the truth (by the hypocrites):

(The hypocrites) swear by God that they have said nothing (wrong); yet most certainly have they uttered a saying which amounts to a denial of the truth, and have (thus) denied the truth after (having professed) their self-surrender to God.

Islahi understands the verse as saying that the hypocrites, instead of rejecting Islam, have harmed their relationship with the Muslim community (*ye wo log hain jinhone izhar to islam ka kiya lekin apne is istahza se irtikab kufr ka kiya*, *ibid*, p. 610).

Islahi concludes that the hypocrites have become the “enemies of Islam” (*islam dushmani*, *ibid*, p. 606)⁷⁵ and that they must be excluded from Muslim society *as a group*, like the Jews. The Muslim community has the duty to separate itself from such people (*goya islami mu'shara ki ghair matlub 'anasir se tathir ki rah mein . . . in nam nahad musalmanon ko bhi chana kar alag karen*, *ibid*, p. 602). Henceforward, the hypocrites no longer belong to the Muslim community (*ab ye munafikin musalmanon ke zimrah ke log nahin hai balke ye bhi kuffar hi ke zimrah mein shamil hain*, *ibid*, p. 609). Islahi interprets the command to “strive hard” (*jihad*) in the same definitive way as he did in verse 43 where the Prophet (peace be upon

⁷⁵ Islahi uses the same term: “*islam dushmani*” again later in the Surah (cf. *ibid*, p. 613). He also refers to the enemies of Islam (*islam ke dushmanon*, *ibid*, p. 592), a phrase that occurs again later (*ibid*, p. 642).

him) is told not to allow the hypocrites to misuse his patience (*munafikin tumhari karim alnafsi se bahut ghalat faidah utha rahe hain*, ibid, p. 583).

Islahi also dismisses “the Bedouin” because none of them had any excuse (*koi ‘asr nahin hai*, ibid, p. 629) for working against Islam and the Muslims (*islam aur musalmanon ko nuqsan pahunchane ki koshish karen*, ibid, p. 626). Yet the Qur’an seems to recognize different kinds of Bedouin, as verse 101 says:

But among the Bedouin who dwell around you there are hypocrites; and among the people of the (Prophet’s) City (too) there are such as have grown insolent in (their) hypocrisy. Thou dost not always know them, (O Muhammad – but) We know them. We shall cause them to suffer doubly (in this world); and then they will be given over to awesome suffering (in the life to come).

Since, after the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him), no one can know whether or not a person is to be punished in hell (*rasul ke ba’d, kisi ke bab mein qat’i taur par is bat ke ma’lum hone ka koi zariy’ah nahin hai*, ibid, p. 654), Islahi must be describing the situation when the Prophet (peace be upon him) was preaching with clear and complete evidence (*itmam hujjat*). Arab unbelievers will not experience such an opportunity again (*ab . . . itmam hujjat ka daur in ke liye khatam ho raha tha*, ibid, p. 539). These circumstances make it possible for Islahi to identify and to banish the hypocrites from Islamic society (*in ko islam aur islami mu’shara se koi ta’lluq nahin hai*, ibid, pp. 630-631). Islahi even rejects any possibility that there could be a change of heart on their part (*in ke liye tauba ke darwaze band ho cuke hai*, ibid, p. 665). Such a categorical separation of the hypocrites from Muslim society is demanded by the overall theme (*‘umud*) of the Surah, which offers such a stark choice between Islam and execution. However, conditions in the modern world make it difficult to categorize a group as the “enemies of Islam” and to banish them from the community.

Transcending the Specific Context

References to “the believers” in this Surah usually apply to the Muslims of the period of revelation. According to Islahi, the opening verse of the Surah speaks of the responsibility of “all the Muslims” of that time (*tamam musalmanon par*, ibid, p. 537) and that the Muslims were the addressees (*khitab musalmanon se tha*, ibid.). Islahi explains the circumstances that existed in that period and describes the covenants or agreements made while the Prophet (peace be upon him) was still present among the believers. The

time for diplomacy and compromise was over (*ab tablig o da'wat aur itmam hujjat ka daur in ke liye khatam ho raha tha is wajh se ab in ke kisi groh ke sath kisi ma'hade ka sawal kharaj az bahs tha*, *ibid*, p. 539). Moreover, Islahi says that the last part of verse 4:

Verily, God loves those who are conscious of Him,
refers to the way Muslims should deal with others collectively and politically (*musalmanon se man haisiyat aljama't ijtama'i aur siyasi taqwa ka matalba bhi karta hai*, *ibid*, p. 539). Islahi understands the verse according to the tense situation of open hostility that the Muslims were experiencing at that time.

Furthermore, Islahi understands the "other people" referred to in verse 106 as three men (*ye tin admi they*, *ibid*, p. 640):

And (there are yet) others – (people whose cases are) deferred until
God wills to judge them: He will either chastise them or turn again
unto them in His mercy – for God is all-knowing, wise.

Connecting the above verse with verse 118, Islahi says it alludes to three historical personalities. He even mentions the names that tradition has given them (*riwayat mein*, *ibid*). Islahi does not consider the possibility that verse 118 could refer to the three main groups mentioned in the introduction to the Surah (*mushrikin, ahl kitab, munafikin*, *ibid*, pp. 523-524).⁷⁶

It is clear that the Surah describes the situation in which the Muslims of that period were living. Verse 7 says:

How could they who ascribe divinity to aught beside God be granted a
covenant by God and His Apostle, unless it be those (of them) with
whom you (O believers) have made a covenant in the vicinity of the
Inviolable House of Worship.

Although this verse comes as a general directive, the people addressed are the Muslims who were involved in relationships with unbelievers (*khitab agarche bazahir 'am hai lekin raye sakhan in musalmanon ki taraf khas taur par se hai jo mushrikin ke andar apne ta'lluqat . . . ho gaye they*, *ibid*, p. 542). Moreover, there are clear indications (*qarina yahan qabl-i-tawajjuh hai*, *ibid*, p. 543) that the covenant or agreement referred to here is the historical agreement made with the Quraysh at the time of *Hudabiyyah* (cf. *ibid*.).

⁷⁶ Muhammad Asad's translation refers to three main groups: "And (He turned in His mercy, too,) towards the three (groups of believers)". Asad (1980), p. 283.

However, Islahi frequently says that, “according to the text” or “according to the words used”, a verse may be addressed to a general audience even when the verse describes the specific situation of Muslim believers (*khitab ba’itibar alfaz ‘am hai lekin rue sakhan in musalmanon hi ki taraf hai jo abhi apne sabiq rauwabat o ta’lluqat ke bandhano se puri tarah azad nahin huey they*, *ibid*, p. 547). Islahi brings out the distinction between the specific and the general meaning in his comment on verse 34:

O you who have attained to faith! Behold, many of the rabbis and monks do indeed wrongfully devour men’s possessions and turn (others) away from the path of God. But as for all who lay up treasures of gold and silver and do not spend them for the sake of God – give them the tidings of grievous suffering (in the life to come).

Islahi is saying that although the verse is referring to certain people living at the time of revelation, the style of the verse indicates that it also contains a more universal teaching (*is ka uslub-i-bayan ‘am ta’lim ka hai ke jo log bhi daulat jama’ karenge . . . ibid*, pp. 565-566). Islahi is attempting to move beyond the specific context of the verse.

Another example is provided in verse 100, which provides examples of people with a universal appeal:

And as for the first and foremost of those who have forsaken the domain of evil and of those who have sheltered and succored the Faith, as well as those who follow them in (the way of righteousness) – God is well-pleased with them, and well-pleased are they with Him.

This verse alludes to important historical groups of believers, namely, the first emigrants to Medina (*muhajirin*), their helpers (*ansar*) and those who converted to Islam during the period that followed (*sahaba*) – at least three groups of believers are held up as models of faith (*‘am musalmanon ke samne . . . misal aur namuna hai*, *ibid*, p. 635).

Furthermore, when Islahi explains how the Muslim community should exercise honesty in their dealings with other nations (*musalmanon se man haisiyat aljama’t . . . dusri qaumon se jo ma’amlat aur ma’ahidat karen in mein rastbaz, sadaqat sha’ar aur wafadar rahen*, *ibid*, 539), he seems to be moving beyond the specific context of society in Medina in order to formulate a directive that is applicable in every situation.

A final example of a universal teaching occurs in verse 24, which concerns family relations and material possessions. The purity of a believer’s love for his family members is a universal criterion by which to judge the depth of

his love for God (*ye muhabat ilahi ke janchne ke liye ek aisi kausuti hai jis se har shakhs apni rozmara ki zindagi mein apne iman aur apni muhabat ko janch sakta hai*, *ibid*, p. 552). Moreover,

Islahi says the general principle contained in verse 34 applies in a general way to all people (*'am ta'lim*, *ibid*, p. 565). However, Islahi proceeds to explain how this principle should be applied under an Islamic government (*islami hukumat*, *ibid*, p. 566) or in an Islamic society (*islami mu'sharah*, *ibid*, p. 567). In short, the conditions that Islahi lays down for the application of this verse describe the specific situation of Islamic society.

Different Kinds of Language

This Surah lists *hijrah* as one of the outstanding qualities of the believer. Muhammad Asad translates this word as “forsaking the domain of evil” in verse 20:

Those who believe, and who have forsaken the domain of evil and have striven hard in God's cause with their possessions and their lives have the highest rank in the sight of God; and it is they, they who shall triumph (in the end).

Since Islahi makes no further comment on the concept of *hijrah*, it would seem that Islahi understands the concept in the same physical, *prima-facie* sense outlined in the previous Surah. This conclusion would seem to be confirmed by the fact that Islahi continues to use the concepts *dar al kufr* and *dar al islam* to describe the separation between Muslims and non-Muslims (cf. *ibid*, p. 661).

Islahi has no difficulty, however, in accepting the figurative language of verse 32:

They want to extinguish God's guiding light with their utterances.

Islahi says that this verse uses a parable to express a truth (*haqiqat ko ek tamsili rang mein numaya kiya ja raha hai*, *ibid*, p. 564) and he develops the image using his own figurative language (cf. *ibid*). However, Islahi does not consider the image of buying and selling in verse 111 as worthy of special comment, though it is an example of a metaphor:

Behold, God has bought of the believers their lives and their possessions, promising them paradise in return . . . Rejoice, then, in the bargain which you have made with Him: for this, this is the triumph supreme!

Islahi actually denies that verse 125 makes use of a metaphor:

But as for those in whose hearts is disease, each new message but adds another (element of) disbelief to the disbelief which they already harbour, and they die while (still) refusing to acknowledge the truth. According to Islahi, the verse does not express a spiritual disease by means of a metaphor but as an actual reality (*mahz ist'arah nahin balke ek haqiqat*, *ibid*, p. 665).

Finally, Islahi understands the narrative in verse 118 about the “three persons” as referring to historical figures and he gives a physical description of the place. He even mentions the number of days those men actually wandered about (*pachas din in logon par aise guzre*, *ibid*, p. 658). On the other hand, he explains the meaning of the verse in terms of the doors of a person’s heart (*khuda ki zamin mein admi ke liye bari wusa't hai bashartike logon ke dilon ke darwaze is ke liye khule huey hon*, *ibid*). Islahi gives the impression that he moves back and forth from using language in a literal, physical way to using language in a more figurative, metaphorical way. He does not provide clear criteria for deciding which kind of language is more appropriate in any particular situation.

Conclusions

According to Islahi, the absence of the customary *bismi allah* connects the theme ('*umud*) of this Surah with the former Surah. Hence, it contains the same idea concerning the supremacy of *din* and Islam that Islahi described in the previous Surah *Al Anfal*. If the absence of the words *bismi allah* are a sign that these two Surahs are thematically connected, it follows logically that the use of *bismi allah* separates Surahs from each other. Yet Islahi finds many thematic connections between Surahs that begin with the words *bismi allah*.

Islahi restricts the scope of the phrase from verse 33: "to prevail over all (false) religion" by highlighting only its political dimension. Moreover, he says that the light and guidance of the Qur'an is dependent on the victory of the Muslims over the Quraysh. Islahi even concludes that verse 5 presents the option to convert to Islam or face execution (*ya to islam qabul karen ya talwar*, *ibid*, p. 540). However, it is incorrect to say that non-Muslims were faced with this extreme option. Those who refused to accept Islam were no longer permitted to live in the vicinity of the Inviolable House of Worship. They had to live elsewhere but they were not forced to accept Islam under pain of execution. Furthermore, Islahi fails to respect his own insistence about understanding the Qur'an as a whole when, in this context, he overlooks verse 256 of Surah *Al Baqarah*: "There shall be no coercion in matters of faith".

Islahi considers the external manifestations of Islam mentioned in verse 5 to be the sign that a person has become a *muslim*. However, the inner attitude of surrender to God (*islam*) cannot be determined according to these external manifestations. Islahi is able to judge whether a person has accepted the *din-i-ibrahimi* merely by observing his performance of religious rituals (*namaz aur zakat ek jam'a ta'bir hai islam ke nazam 'ibadat o ata't mein dakhil hone ki*, *ibid*). Such a claim seems inconsistent with Islahi's own view that the spiritual qualities of *islam*, rather than its external dimensions, are more important (*islam mein asli qadar o qimat rohani o imani iqdar ke hai*, *ibid*, p. 557). Even the performance of *namaz* and the giving of *zakat* cannot guarantee that God has granted these spiritual qualities to a person. The main concern of *din-i-ibrahimi* is deeper insight (*islam mein ta'lim o ta'llam ka asal maqsud din mein basirat hasil karna . . . baqi chize sab sanwi haisiyat rakhti hain*, *ibid*, p. 662). By stressing these external criteria, Islahi

is equating *islam*, which is the *din* of Abraham with Islam, understood as the laws, doctrines and practices of the Muslim community.

The close link between *din* and the natural environment are an indication to Islahi that *din* cannot change (cf. *ibid*, p. 570). However, it is clear that the Islamic government adopted various practices in order to out-manuever its enemies and devised new regulations to deal with the interactions between the various groups that existed within the Islamic society of Medina. These examples suffice to show that Islam is a movement that can adapt creatively to a changing environment.

Islahi tends to understand people according to which group they belong. Consequently, the hypocrites are grouped together with those that are outside the Muslim community. However, the Qur'an seems to be more forgiving of people that waver between right and wrong. Besides, it may have been possible to make a clear distinction between genuine Muslims and hypocrites during the time of revelation according to Islahi's concept of *itimam hujjat* (cf. *ibid*, p. 587). Conditions in the modern world make it far more difficult to banish certain people from Islamic society on the basis of certain pre-conceived categories (*in ko islam aur islami mu'shara se koi ta'lluq nahin hai*, *ibid*, pp. 630-631).

Whereas this Surah constantly refers to the believers (many verses of the Surah open with the words: "O you who have attained to faith"),⁷⁷ Islahi usually describes the addressees as "the Muslims" (*khitab musalmanon se tha*, *ibid*, p. 537). Islahi even refers to these Muslim addressees as a political group (*musalmanon se man haisiyat aljama't ijtama'i aur siyasi taqwa ke matalba*, *ibid*, p. 539). For Islahi, the Surah is addressing the members of Islamic society (*islami mu'sharah*, *ibid*, p. 567) and government (*islami hukumat*, *ibid*, p. 566) because Islahi is reading the Surah according to his own concept of its theme (*'umud*). Yet the words of address used in the Surah have a far more universal scope.

Islahi does make an effort to move beyond the socio-political context of Islamic society in Medina in order to give this Surah a more universal meaning. However, his explanation that some verses have both a general as

⁷⁷ Cf. verses 23, 28, 34, 38, 119, 123 and "the believers" are referred to in many other verses, for example, in verses 70-71).

well as a specific connotation lacks clarity (*khitab ba'itibar alfaz 'am hain lekin rue sakhan in musalmanon hi ki taraf hai*, *ibid*, p. 547).

Finally, the references Islahi makes to the physical aspects of the migration (*hijrah*) and to the geographical boundaries of Islamic society (*dar al kufr* and *dar al islam*, *ibid*, p. 661) indicate that he understands these concepts in the traditional *prima facie* and physical sense. Moreover, the disease mentioned in verse 125 is an actual disease (*mahz ist'arah nahin balke ek haqiqat*, *ibid*, p. 665). Besides using words in a physical or material way, however, Islahi also resorts to figurative, symbolic language in his discussion of this Surah. Since it is very important for the reader to be able to decide whether a verse should be understood in a physical or in a figurative way, it would have been helpful if Islahi had provided the criteria for making such a distinction.

Introduction to Surah Group Three

Islahi singles out Surah *An Nur* from the fifteen Surahs of Group Three and highlights verse 55 because it expresses the theme ('*umud*) in a characteristic way:

God has promised those of you who have attained to faith and do righteous deeds that, of a certainty, He will cause them to accede to power on earth, even as He caused (some of) those who lived before them to accede to it; and that, of a certainty, He will firmly establish for them the religion which He has been pleased to bestow on them; and that, of a certainty, He will cause their erstwhile state of fear to be replaced by a sense of security.

Islahi says that the above verse presents the conditions that have been laid down so that the believers will enjoy success and prosperity (*falah*, vol. 4, p. 9). These conditions flow from the ethical demands of faith (*akhlaq o kirdar ke sath mashrut hai jo iman ka lazmi maqtaza hai*, *ibid*) that will distinguish a believing community (*muminana mu'ashrah*, *ibid*) from an unbelieving one (*kafirana mu'ashrah*, *ibid*).

Furthermore, Islahi says that each of the fifteen Surahs of the Group has its own characteristic way of expressing the overall theme ('*umud*) of the whole Group:

Repeated reflection on the Surahs of this Group gives one the clear impression that they revolve around one truth, though they approach it from different aspects and express it in different ways. A brief statement of this truth would be to say that the struggle between truth and falsity that took place at the instigation of the Prophet will result in victory for the Prophet and for his followers and defeat and humiliation for his opponents, the Quraysh (*ahl iman ki kamyabi o fathmandi aur quraysh ki zillat o hazimat par mantahi hogi*, *ibid*, p.10).

Islahi considers Surah Group Three to be pronouncing a *warning* for the Quraysh and proclaiming *good news* for the Prophet and his followers (*ibid*). Unless the Quraysh change their evil ways, they will experience the same fate as the nations that have gone before them. The Quraysh will find ample evidence for the serious nature of this warning from the history related in Surah Group Three, as well as from reflecting on the many indications that

arise out of their own reason and nature as well as from observing the living beings around them and the natural laws and history of the universe (*quraysh par 'aql o fitrat aur afaq o anfus ke dalail aur tarikh o nizam kainat ke shawahid se ye bat wazeh ki gayi hai*, ibid). Similarly, provided that they remain firmly committed to the truth and are patient in adversity, the Prophet and his followers may be quite certain of their eventual success (*isi tarah nabi salla allahu alayhi wa sallam aur ap ke sahaba ko sabr o istiqamat aur taqwa ki talqin farmai gayi hai ke jis haq ko le kar tum uthe ho injamkar ki kamyabi aur ferozmandi isi ka hissah hai*, ibid). The evidence supporting the certainty of their victory is just as available for them as it is for their opponents, the Quraysh. Islahi says that "the way of God" (*sunnat ilahi*) assures those who persevere in times of adversity that they will have victory and success (*sunnat ilahi ye hai ke haq ko ghalbah aur kamyabi ki manzil tak pahunchne ke liye azmaish ke mukhtalif marhalon se guzarna parta hai*, ibid).

The key question concerns the nature and the extent of this victory. Besides the claim of victory for believers in the next world, does this victory also refer to the capitulation of Mecca and the success and prosperity of the believers *in this world*, as Islahi claims it does? Is verse 55 of Surah *An Nur* (quoted above) a reference to the historical victory of the Muslims in Mecca? Islahi says that those who persevere in the way of God will experience success *in this world* as well as in the next (*dunya aur akhirat donon mein kamyabi tumhara hi hissah hai*, ibid). It is precisely this point that Islahi wants to highlight by providing a selection of verses taken from Surah Group Three, namely, that God promises *prosperity in this world* before providing an even greater reward in the world to come. In fact, Islahi articulates the main message (*'umud*) of Surah Group Three in terms of God's promise to provide some form of success and victory for believers *in this world* while holding a severe punishment in store for unbelievers.

Surah *Yunus*, the first Surah of Group Three, illustrates the theme (*'umud*) of the whole Surah Group in a phrase from verse 2:

Warn all mankind, and give unto those who have attained to faith the glad tidings that in their Sustainer's sight they surpass all others in that they are completely sincere.

Islahi comments that this verse presents the theme (*'umud*) in very clear words (*is surah ka 'umud nihayat jami' alfaz mein . . . wazeh ho raha hai*, ibid, p. 10).

In verse 49 of the Surah *Hud*, the same theme ('*umud*) is expressed in the different words:

Be, then, (like Noah,) patient in adversity – for, behold, the future belongs to the God-conscious!

Surah *Yusuf* expresses the same theme in verse 90:

Verily, if one is conscious of Him and patient in adversity – behold, God does not fail to requite the doers of good!

In the Surah *Ar R'ad*, the same theme is presented with some detail in verse 22 (*kisi qadar tafsil bhi a gayi hai*, *ibid*, p. 11):

Who are patient in adversity out of a longing for their Sustainer's countenance, and are constant in prayer, and spend on others, secretly and openly, out of what We provide for them as sustenance, and (who) repel evil with good. It is these that shall find their fulfillment in the hereafter.

Similarly, Surah *Ibrahim*, verse 27, guarantees the believers steadfastness in this world and in the next (*dunya aur akhirat donon mein ahl iman ke sabit qadam ka zimn hai*, *ibid*):

God grants firmness unto those who have attained to faith through the word that is unshakably true in the life of this world as well as in the life to come; but the wrongdoers He lets go astray: for God does whatever He wills.

Surah *An Nahl* has the following words in verse 30 to illustrate the same theme:

Good fortune awaits, in this world, all who persevere in doing good; but their ultimate end will be far better still: for, how excellent indeed will be the state of the God-conscious (in the life to come)!

Furthermore, Islahi says that in Surah *Al Isra* (or Surah *Bani Israil*) those who choose the way of God will hear the glad tidings of success (*fath*) in this world and in the next (*jin logon ne ye rah ikhtiyar kar li hai dunya aur akhirat ki falah ki basharat inhi ke liye hai*, *ibid*). His certainty is based on verses 9-10:

Verily, this Qur'an shows the way to all that is most upright, and gives the believers who do good deeds the glad tidings that theirs will be a great reward; and (it announces, too), that We have readied grievous suffering for those who will not believe in the life to come.

According to Islahi, another illustration of this theme is to be found in Surah *Al Anbiya*, verse 105:

We laid it down in all the books of divine wisdom that My righteous servants shall inherit the earth.⁷⁸

Finally, verse 55 of Surah *An Nur*, the last Surah of Group Three, presents the same message in a most clear fashion (*ye basharat wazeh se wazeh tar ho gayi hai*, *ibid*, p. 12):

God has promised those of you who have attained to faith and do righteous deeds that, of a certainty, He will cause them to accede to power on earth, even as He caused (some of) those who lived before them to accede to it; and that, of a certainty, He will firmly establish for them the religion which He has been pleased to bestow on them; and that, of a certainty, He will cause their erstwhile state of fear to be replaced by a sense of security.

The purpose of highlighting the above verses is to present the general mood ('*am mazaj*, *ibid*) of Surah Group Three. Islahi asserts that the theme of each specific Surah as well as its characteristic way of argumentation will all become easy to understand once we have analyzed the meaning of the Surah (*har surah ka 'umud aur bahs o istadlal mein is ka sahih rukh matalib ke tajziyah se samne ayega*, *ibid*).

⁷⁸ A comparable verse is to be found in Surah *Al Baqarah*, verse 30: "And lo! Thy Sustainer said unto the angels: 'Behold, I am about to establish upon earth one who shall inherit it'".

Surah Yunus

Introduction

Since Surah *Yunus* is the first Surah of Group Three, Islahi devotes his opening remarks to the theme (*'umud*) of the whole of Surah Group Three, which he illustrates with a verse from almost each Surah in this Surah Group. I have already presented this list of verses in my introduction to Surah Group Three (above).

As for Surah *Yunus*, Islahi says the theme (*'umud*) of this Surah is expressed quite clearly in the phrase from verse 2:

Warn all mankind, and give unto those who have attained to faith the glad tiding that in their Sustainer's sight they surpass all others in that they are completely sincere.

The key phrase in this sentence, as far as the *'umud* is concerned, is the phrase "they surpass all others in that they are completely sincere" (*anna lahum qadama sidqin*), which Islahi translates as "having precedence" or "surpassing in status" (*bari paligah hai*, vol. 4, p. 11).

Islahi says that the *'umud*, as well as the characteristic process of argumentation of each Surah will emerge clearly only after an analysis has been made of the meaning of the Surah as a whole (*matalib ka tajaziyah*, ibid, p. 12). But if Islahi can provide such an analysis of the meaning of the whole Surah in a few pages (as he claims to do at the beginning of his commentary on each Surah), it would seem that further contextual analysis is superfluous. Of what importance is the contextual study that follows?

However, even after reading Islahi's analysis of the meaning of the Surah as a whole, the reader is still left wondering how the phrase "they surpass all others in that they are completely sincere" (*anna lahum qadama sidqin*) of verse 2 should be understood. If the words are translated in a physical or in a material sense, the phrase would express the success and prosperity promised to believers in this world, which is in keeping with the overall theme (*'umud*) of the Surah Group.⁷⁹ Naturally, Islahi would prefer his own translation because it fits in better with the overall theme of the Surah Group.

⁷⁹ As Muhammad Asad says, the phrase could also be understood in a more personal, spiritual way as "denoting a concord between what a person actually conceives in his mind or feels and what he expresses by word, deed or attitude – in other words, complete sincerity". Asad (1980), p. 287, note 4.

Victory in This World and in the Next

Islahi finds the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah expressed repeatedly in several of its verses. Right at the start of the Surah, in its second verse (already quoted above), we find a phrase that Islahi says describes the prominent and respected status of the believers ('*izzat ka maqam, martaba buland, unchi paligah aur lazawal sar farazi*, *ibid*, p. 22). According to Islahi, the fact that this verse stresses glad tidings for the believers is in keeping with the nature of Surah Group Three (*is grup ki tamam suraton mein numayan pahl u ahl iman ke liye basharat hi ka hai*, *ibid*). Surah Group Three gives expression to the triumph of God, his Prophets and their disciples.

However, Islahi does not completely dispel the ambiguity surrounding his concept of victory in this world. He sometimes suggests that victory will occur only *in the next world*. For instance, Islahi finds an allusion to the theme of success and prosperity in verse 103:

We save Our apostles and those who have attained to faith.

Islahi says the phrase expresses the success that the believers will eventually experience (*bilakhir allah ta'ala apne rasulon aur ahl iman ko kamyabi 'ata farmata hai*, *ibid*, p. 94), thereby suggesting that the success these verses promise to the believers is a success that comes only "at the end" (*bilakhir*), that is, in the next world.

In spite of this ambiguity, Islahi stresses that the glad tidings concern life *in this world*. As verse 64 says:

For them there is the glad tiding (of happiness) in the life of this world and in the life to come; (and since) nothing could ever alter (the outcome of) God's promises, this, this is the triumph supreme!

Islahi understands the verse to mean that victory is to be achieved in this world as well (*is dunya mein bhi lazman ghalba hasil hota hai*, *ibid*, p. 66). Noting that victory has a separate connotation for apostles and for prophets (*in anbiya ka ma'aml a jo sirf nabi they, rasul nahin they, is se alag hai*, *ibid*), Islahi says that the glad tiding mentioned in the last sentence of verse 87:

And give thou (O Moses) the glad tiding (of God's succour) to all believers,
had already been announced in verse 2 of the same Surah (*is basharat ka zikr ayat 2 mein guzar chuka hai*, *ibid*, p. 81):

Warn all mankind, and give unto those who have attained to faith the glad tiding that in their Sustainer's sight they surpass all others in that they are completely sincere.

Hence, he claims that both verses refer to the victory of believers in this world and in the next (*dunya aur akhirat donon mein fauz o falah*, ibid).

Furthermore, according to Islahi, there is a reference to the victory of the believers in this world in verse 17:

Verily, those who are lost in sin will never attain to a happy state.

Islahi reminds the reader that the background to this verse concerns the success of truth in the struggle between truth and falsity (*haq o batil ki jo kashmakash barpa hoti hai wo lazman haq ke ghalba par muntahi hoti hai*, ibid, p. 33) and concludes that the victory must take place *in this world* (*akhirat se pahli is dunya mein bhi ghalba lazmi hai*, ibid).

Moreover, the glad tidings the Israelites received are described in verse 93:

And (thereafter), indeed, We assigned unto the children of Israel a most goodly abode, and provided for them sustenance out of the good things of life.

Islahi says that the verse refers to the way God established the Israelites in the Promised Land (*bani israil ko apne muntakhab kardah 'alaye mein iqtidar o istahqam bakhsha*, ibid, p. 85), understanding the verse as referring to the physical victory that took place in history.

It seems clear that Islahi is stressing the physical, historical aspect of victory that took place in this world. Two questions remain unanswered. The first is whether this victory could be understood in a more spiritual and emotional sense, instead of the physical, material or *prima facie* sense emphasized by Islahi. The other question concerns the sense in which this victory could also occur in the contemporary world of the reader.

The Appeal to Reason

Another way that Islahi tries to find a unity in the Surah is through his own peculiar approach to reason. The argument seems to be that the Surah itself must be coherent because it points to the harmony and cohesiveness of the universe, which any rational person will readily accept (*koi salim al'aql aur koi mustaqim alfitrat insan*, ibid, p. 25). Verse 3 says:

Verily, your Sustainer is God, who has created the heavens and the earth in six aeons, and is established on the throne of His almightiness, governing all that exists.

Islahi concludes from this verse that the universe is not the result of an accident (*ittifaqi hadse ke taur par zahur mein nahin a gayi hai*, ibid, p. 23). Any reasonable observer will be able to draw the conclusion that the world is not a place for empty pastimes (*na ye kisi kalindare ka khel tamasha hai*, ibid) but has been entrusted to mankind for a purpose (*insan jo is kainat mein khalifa ki haisiyat rakhta hai . . . is ke samne ek aisa din aye jis mein wo log pure insaf ke sath apne 'amal ka silah payen*, ibid). In other words, Islahi says that mankind's moral responsibility can be rationally deduced from the evidence available in the universe. Any other conclusion would work against reason and nature (*jo 'aql o fitrat aur khud tumhare apne musallama ke khilaf hai*, ibid). In fact, Islahi finds the basic purpose of the universe expressed in the following phrase from verse 4:

He creates (man) in the first instance, and then brings him forth anew to the end that He may reward with equity all who attain to faith and do righteous deeds.

Islahi says that the basic purpose of the coming day of judgment is to reward mankind for his good deeds (*qiyamat ka asl maqsud dar haqiqat ahl iman ko jaza dena hai*, ibid, p. 24). The universe cannot continue as it is without the certainty of human accountability on the Last Day (*ye sari kudrat o hikmat bemaqsud o beghayat ho jati hai*, ibid, p. 25). Islahi says the same subject was dealt with in verse 191 of Surah *Al 'Imran* (ibid, p. 26). In short, the order of the universe and man's accountability must be evident to any reflective person (*is nazam par jo shakhs bhi ghaur karta hai*, ibid).

It is clear that the Surah does draw our attention to the abundant evidence available in the universe for the existence of a Creator and, subsequently, to the coming accountability on the Last Day. But it seems to me that the Surah does not present this message in such a logical, rational way that to deny it would simply amount to nonsense. Instead, the Surah expects a person to be sensitive enough to recognize all this evidence as pointing to the work of a benevolent Creator and Sustainer. Islahi tends to reduce the text of the Surah to a philosophical treatise. It is significant that he rejects modern philosophy as contrary to the message of the Qur'an and that he wrote his own book on the philosophy of the Qur'an.⁸⁰

Islahi provides an illustration of his own approach to philosophy in his comment on verse 19 of the present Surah:

⁸⁰ Amin Ahsan Islahi, *Haqiqat Tauhid*, known in English translation as *The Philosophy of the Qur'an*.

And (know that) all mankind were once but one single community, and only later did they begin to hold divergent views. And had it not been for a decree that had already gone forth from thy Sustainer, all their differences would indeed have been settled (from the outset).

According to Islahi, modern philosophers hold that mankind gradually developed from holding divergent opinions about God to a monotheistic view (*jadid falsafion ke is nazariya . . . ke insan ne din ka aghaz shirk se kiya phir darja badarja irtiqa karte hue tauhid tak pahuncha*, *ibid*, p. 35). But the Qur'an teaches the opposite view, saying that mankind lost his initial, monotheistic understanding of God (*quran is ke bilkul bar'aks ye kahta hai ke khuda ne sharu' hi se insan ko tauhid ki ta'lim di*, *ibid*). Islahi says that the various intellectual approaches of mankind today diverge from the basic unity that was established at the beginning (*aj shirk o zalalat ke mukhtalif tariqon ki maujudgi . . . gumrahon ki apni ijad se zahur mein aye hain*, *ibid*). Consequently, Islahi does not have a positive opinion of the development of philosophy, preferring the uniform way of thinking that was the original characteristic of mankind. His preference for a uniform way of thinking influences his approach to the present Surah, leading to a narrow use of reason and rationality as the only way to understand the verses about the cohesiveness of the universe and the day of accountability.

A similar understanding emerges from Islahi's views on verse 93 concerning the Jews:

And it was not until knowledge (of God's revelation) was vouchsafed to them that they began to hold divergent views.

Islahi says that, because of their ungratefulness for God's blessings, the Jews developed all kinds of divergent views with regard to religion and the Torah (*allah ke din aur is ki kitab o shar' ke ma'amle mein . . . tarah tarah ke ikhtilafat paida kar ke payi hui haqiqat gum kar di*, *ibid*, p. 85). Yet divergent views with regard to religion and the Torah need not be a sign of ungratefulness. Differences of opinion in these matters will always come with intellectual involvement and inquiry into the message of God.⁸¹

A further indication of Islahi's concept of rational inquiry emerges from his opening remarks to verses 71-93 of the present Surah. Islahi says that the

⁸¹ Muhammad Asad quotes Razi as saying: "The people of Moses remained of one religious persuasion (*'ala millah wahidah*) and of one opinion, without any disagreement, until they began to study the Torah: whereupon they became aware of the (various) problems and obligations involved, and disagreements (regarding their interpretation) arose among them. And so God makes it clear (in the above Qur'an-verse) that this kind of disagreement is inevitable (*la budd*) and will always occur in the life of this world". Asad (1980), p. 306, note 114.

previous verses expressed the message through an appeal to reason and to nature (*'aql o fitrat ke dalail se*, ibid, p. 69) whereas the following verses seek to confirm the same truths with an appeal to history (*inhi haqiq ko tarikh ki roshni mein wazeh karna hai jo upar 'aql o fitrat ke dalail se mubarhan kiye gaye hain*, ibid). Islahi seems to be advocating the separation of rational and historical inquiry. But historical discourse must appeal to reason and nature as well. Islahi presumes that rational discourse is distinct from historical discourse without giving any further justification for such a distinction.

Moreover, he sees no significant difference between the various historical accounts related in these verses, except the references to details of time and place (*farq agar hai to nam o maqam aur zamane ka hai*, ibid). Islahi says that one can disregard such details of time and place in order to grasp the meaning of these historical accounts (*asl dastan is qadr baham digar mushaba hai ke nam o maqam ke farq ko nazar andaz kar dijiye to sre se koi farq hi nahin rah jata*, ibid). But if the details of these historical accounts are not very significant for their meaning, one could draw the conclusion that these historical accounts function simply as parables and must be understood in the way we understand parables.

Islahi says that the third person is used in the parables of verses 22-23 because this is the usual style of parables (*yahan se uslub ghahib ka ho gaya, is liye ke ye tamsil hai aur tamsil ke liye uslub-i-bayan 'umumi hi mauzun aur mu'assir hota hai*, ibid, p. 40). Just as he had done earlier to establish a direct link between a parable and the Jews (cf. Surah Group One), in these verses Islahi finds a direct link between the parables and the Quraysh, despite the words: "O men!" in verse 23 (*ayuha nas mein khitab phir quraysh se ho gaya*, ibid, p. 40). However, Islahi also detects a general truth conveyed by the parable (*isi haqiqat ko insani zindagi ke ek 'amata al warud waqe' se misal de kar samjhaya hai*, ibid). Islahi does not apply the further parable, mentioned in verse 24, to any specific group but proceeds to analyze the parable in his own peculiar, rationalistic way (cf. ibid, p. 42).

Moreover, from the use of the word "story" in verse 71: "And convey unto them the story of Noah", Islahi argues that this word indicates the occurrence of an important event and distinguishes it from an historical style of writing (*is lafz ke ist'emal se yahan pata chalta hai ke maqsud nuh aur qaum nuh ki zindagi ke kisi ahm maur aur kisi faislakun waqe' ki sarguzasht sunana hai. muarikhon ki tarz ki mujarad dastan sarai pesh nazar nahin hai*,

ibid, p. 74). In other words, Islahi denies that the correct meaning of an event can be derived from historical writing. Yet, surprisingly, Islahi still finds the historical context of this event significant and refers to his earlier discussion of the same historical context in verses 60-64 of Surah *Al A'raf* (*is ke mahl waqu'a aur is ke tahmini zamana ke taraf isharah kar chuke hain* (ibid).

Similarly, his frequent references to the complete and adequate presentation of arguments by a Prophet (for example, the concept *itimam hujjat* is mentioned three times on p. 60 alone) raises further questions about the kind of conditions Islahi would lay down for the argument to be completely convincing. Islahi never discusses the criteria for such a perfect presentation of the arguments for religion (*din*), simply stating that it is in the nature of a Messenger of God (*rasul*) to achieve such a level of presentation (*hazrat musa aur hazrat harun faraun aur is ke a'yan ke pas rasul ke haisiyat se gaye they is wajh se unhone lazman in ke upar allah ki hujjat tamam ki. is ke baghair rasul ka mishan pura nahin hota*, ibid, p. 76). Islahi rejects the opinion of those who say that Moses was simply a political leader who led his people to freedom (*sirf bani israil ki azadi ka mutalba kiya*, ibid). More than being a freedom fighter, Moses was a Prophet who invited his people to faith and to Islam (*iman o islam ki . . . da'awat*, ibid). Only a Prophet has the capacity to present arguments that will lead the people to faith and to Islam.

In short, Islahi argues that it would be irrational to reject the Prophet's way of reasoning. Similarly, the believer's acceptance of the Prophet's message is a rational activity (*allah ta'ala iman o hidayat ki rah inhi logon par kulta hai jo apne 'aql o dil ki salahiyaton se faidah utate hain*, ibid, p. 49). Islahi goes on to describe those who do not use their reason (*jo log 'aql o fitrat ko takra kar*, ibid) as people who tend to follow their own passions and who are thereby lost (cf. ibid). Islahi wants to promote the correct use of reason in the life of a believer and in understanding the Qur'an. The question remains as to how Islahi understands the concept "reasoning person" when he refers to the person who uses his reason (*'aql wo hai jo dusron ke halat se sabaq le*, ibid. p. 42). Islahi does not explain what kind of lessons a reasonable person should take from his environment.

The Social Context

Another key that Islahi uses to unlock the meaning of the Surah is to investigate the social conditions in which it was revealed. According to Islahi, these conditions will be evident to the reader from the text itself. He begins by identifying the addressees of the text. Verse 12 says:

For (thus it is:) when affliction befalls man, he cries out unto Us,
whether he be lying on his side or sitting or standing

The verse refers to the Quraysh (*quraysh ko mukhatab kar ke*, ibid, p. 32) even though the verse uses a general word for mankind (*insan ka lafz har chand 'am hai lekin is se murad wohi mutamarrid din quraysh hain*, ibid, p. 31). Similarly, verse 21 refers to "such people" (*an nas*) but Islahi claims the words refer to the Quraysh (*ye hal to quraysh hi ka bayan ho raha hai*, ibid, p. 39). The Qur'an uses a style that expresses disregard for the Quraysh (*be iltifati ka izhar*, ibid, p. 39). The same style is used to indicate that this characteristic of the Quraysh was "common to all" (*ye haqiqat bhi samne a jaye ke is bab khas mein jo hal in ka hai wohi hal sab ka hai*, ibid). But it is not clear to whom Islahi is referring when he says that this characteristic of the Quraysh was "common to all". Is it common to all mankind in a general sense or was it common to all people living at the time of revelation? A further illustration of this question can be found in the words "O men!" from verse 23, which would seem to refer to people in general:

O men! All your outrageous deeds are bound to fall back upon your own selves!

But Islahi says that this verse refers specifically to the Quraysh (*ye khitab phir quraysh se ho gaya*, ibid, p. 40). In fact, Islahi is quite certain that, after the parable told about the ships at sea, the Surah again specifically addresses the Quraysh (*tamsil ke ba'd ye quraysh ko phir khitab kiya hai*, ibid, p. 41).

Moreover, Islahi has his own particular way of explaining the context of the words from verse 16:

Indeed, a whole lifetime have I dwelt among you ere this (revelation came to me): will you not, then, use your reason?

He says that the phrase expresses the way the Prophet defended himself before the Quraysh by claiming that he neither showed pretensions to leadership nor claimed to have high-sounding visions (*kab tum ne mere*

andar siyadat o imarat ki bau mahsus ki hai, kab tum ne paya hai ke main unche unche khwab dekhta hun? Ibid, p. 33). Again, verse 17 asks:

And who could be more wicked than they who attribute their own lying inventions to God or give the lie to His messages?

Islahi says the question refers to the authentic character of the Prophet himself (*agar main sachha hun*, ibid). Islahi finds a connection between these two verses by seeing them as emerging from the social environment in which the Prophet's identity was being questioned.

Furthermore, Islahi explains many verses of the Surah by referring to the Arab practices of the period. He claims verses 48-49 refer to the expectations of the Arabs that their gods would give them priority on Judgment Day (*qiyamat hui to in ke dewi dewata wahan in ka khair maqadam karenge*, ibid, p. 47) because these imaginary deities (*farzi ma'budon*, ibid, p. 49) do the work of intercession (*maz'uma sharka aur shaf'a*, ibid, p. 63). Islahi draws on the customs and practices of the Arabs (*ahl 'arab ke 'aqaid*, ibid, p. 48) to situate these verses in their proper context. For example, verse 68 refers to the practice of the Arabs to consider the angels as sons and daughters of God (*mushriqin 'arab . . . farishton ko khuda ki betiyan kahte they*, ibid, p. 68).

Islahi explains other verses in terms of the difficult situation created by the opponents of the Prophet and his followers. Hence, verse 65 has a message of consolation:

And be not grieved by the sayings of those (who deny the truth). Behold, all might and glory belong to God alone: He alone is all-hearing, all-knowing.

Islahi conjectures that the opponents of the Prophet and his followers must have rejected the claims of eventual success they were making (*in ayat ke nuzul ke daur mein musalmanon ka jo hal tha is ke lihaz se tamakan aur ghalba ki wo basharat . . . kuffar ke liye tanz o istahza ka mauzu ban sakti thi*, ibid, p. 66). These opponents ridiculed the Muslims' hope of victory as just a dream (*hukumat o saltanat ke khwab dekh rahe hain*, ibid). Hence, these verses console not only the Prophet but his companions as well (*tasalli o basharat peghambar hi ke liye makhsus nahin hai balke ap ke satiyon ke liye bhi hai*, ibid, p. 65). Islahi clarifies many passages of the Surah by resorting to this need for consolation and encouragement by the Muslims of

the time.⁸² Furthermore, we have another example of the way Islahi finds the social context within the text when Islahi describes the period before the *hijrah* as one of such anarchy that the Muslims were advised to pray in one another's houses, as related in verse 87 (*is 'aburi daur mein inhi gharon ko 'arzi taur par qibla ki haisiyat de di gayi*, *ibid*, p. 81).

Other verses are explained by referring to the social, psychological and historical realities prevalent in society at that time. For example, in order to provide the social background for verse 78, which relates what the leaders of the people were saying, Islahi refers to the power of the aristocracy of the period (*aristokrasi bar sar iqtidar*, *ibid*, p. 77) and to the atrocities they committed (*israili bachon ko qatil kar dene ki jo sangdalana askim chali gayi thi*, *ibid*). In addition, Islahi makes comments of a psychological nature to explain Pharaoh's tactics in verse 79 (*kisi haqiqat ko na manane ki khwaish ek aisi khwaish hai jis ki khatir insan bahot si hamaqaten kar guzarta hai*, *ibid*, p. 78). Islahi is describing characteristics that belong to human beings in general in order to explain the behaviour of Pharaoh.

Another illustration of Islahi's contextual approach is contained in his comments on the words of verse 83: "none save a few of his people declared their faith in Moses". Islahi says the phrase refers to the experience of all the Prophets and actually describes the beginning of Islam itself (*islam ki ibtada'i tarikh bhi isi haqiqat ki shahadat deti hai aur dusre anbiya ki tarikh bhi*, *ibid*, p. 79). After providing this historical background, Islahi goes on to give a more psychological explanation for verse 83 (*is ki wazeh nafsiati wajh ye hai ke hazrat anbiya jis hamigir da'wat-i-islam ko le kar utate hai*, *ibid*) and describes the fearlessness of young people in the face of the displeasure of those in authority (*na waqt ke arbab-i-iqtidar ki barhami ko khatir mein late hain*, *ibid*). Islahi is of the opinion that the verse itself indicates the disposition of those who enjoyed power in society in that period (*is daur mein jo shakhs takht-i-hukumat par tha, wo bhi, jaisa ke ayat ke alfaz se wazeh hai*, *ibid*).

⁸² For example, verses 40 and 42 both provide consolation for the Prophet (*taskin o tasalli*, *ibid* p. 59). Similarly, verses 98-100 are all meant to strengthen and console the Prophet in the face of his difficult situation (cf. *ibid*, p. 90-91).

The Way of God

Islahi is constantly making use of a concept he calls “the way of God” to explain verses in the Qur’an that describe God’s action in the world. For example, verse 11 says:

But We leave them alone (for a while) – all those who do not believe that they are destined to meet Us: (We leave them alone) in their overweening arrogance, blindly stumbling to and fro.

Islahi explains that it is according to “the way of God” (*sunnat ilahi*) that God does not punish unbelievers immediately (*is sunnat ilahi ka taqaza ye hai*, *ibid*, p. 31). The following verse is also clarified with reference to “the way of God” (*sunnat ilahi ke taht*, *ibid*). Similarly, Islahi says that verse 33 consoles the Prophet because unbelievers are people who oppose “the way of God” with them (*ye sunnat ilahi ki zid mein aye hue log hain*, *ibid*, p. 49). The Prophet is reminded that his responsibility is confined to presenting the arguments of the message in a clear way (*itimam-i-hujjat ke ba’d tumhari zimmadari khatam ho jati hai*, *ibid*).

At a time fixed by God, the Prophet is told to declare his imminent departure. Islahi describes this moment with the help of another concept he calls “the proclamation of the Prophet’s departure” (*‘elan-i-barait*). When people show persistent resistance to the message of the Prophet, God tells him to leave them to their own designs. As verse 41 says:

And (so, O Prophet,) if they give thee the lie, say: “To me (shall be accounted) my doings, and to you, your doings; you are not accountable for what I am doing, and I am not accountable for whatever you do”.

Islahi says this statement of the Prophet amounts to a declaration of his abandoning the people to their own fate. Once the Prophet has left them, the people have lost the basis of their security (*jab wo in se ‘elan-i-barait kar deta hai to ye aman jo is ki badaulat qaum ko hasil hoti hai uth jati hai*, *ibid*, p. 58). This moment is, therefore, crucial in the life of any nation. But Islahi’s analysis concerns the period of the Prophets.

Hence, the concept of “the way of God” points to the historical pattern according to which God punishes a nation only after their Prophet has been withdrawn from among them. The Meccans were spared such punishment because many of them believed in the message of the Prophet. Islahi says that verse 46 is an expression of “the way of God” as far as this applies to

them (*ayat mein isi sunnat ilahi ki taraf isharah hai*, ibid, p. 60). Verse 47 puts it clearly:

Now every community has had an apostle; and only after their apostle has appeared (and delivered his message) is judgment passed on them, in all equity; and never are they wronged.

Islahi says that, according to “the way of God”, this verse gives a warning to the Quraysh (*ye quraysh ko anzar hai is sunnat ilahi ki roshni mein*, ibid) and expresses the basic historical pattern of the world according to which those who believe will experience prosperity and those who disbelieve will be defeated, which is essentially the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah (*jo log rasul par iman laye in ko najat o falah hasil hui aur jo log is ki takzib par are rah gaye in ki jar kat di gayi*, ibid).

The Prophet has come to provide them with complete and convincing arguments (*itimam hujjat ke liye khuda ka rasul a chuka hai*, ibid). This is the special task of the messenger of God (*ye sunnat ilahi rasulon ke sath makhsus hai*, ibid, p. 61). Until he has provided complete and convincing arguments, the mission of the apostle has not yet been accomplished (*hujjat tamam . . . ke baghair rasul ka mishan pura nahin hota*, ibid, p. 76). Islahi has the same explanation for verse 88 (cf. ibid, p. 82). He seems to understand the concept of “the way of God” as a law of history to which the modern world is also subject (*is dunya ke andar zindagi ki jo muhlat qaumon ko milti hai wo apni salahiyaton ko aajar karne ke liye milti hai*, ibid, p. 82). But people in the modern world do not have access to the same convincing arguments, which the people who lived at the time of the last Prophet had. Can “the way of God”, then, be a universal law of history for all nations?

The “sealing of hearts” refers to a process which is related to “the way of God (*is sunnat ilahi ki taraf isharah hai*, ibid, p. 75) and which Islahi says is contained in the following phrase from verse 74:

thus it is that We seal the hearts of such as (are wont to) transgress the bounds of what is right.

God appoints his apostles to preach with complete and convincing arguments but the people whose hearts are closed will not accept their message (*aise logon par rasul ke zara'e se itimam hujjat hota hai aur is itimam hujjat ke natija mein in ke dilon par mahr lag jati hai*, ibid, p. 76). According to verse 44, these people are themselves to blame for the way they have closed themselves to the message of the Prophets:

Verily, God does not do the least wrong unto men, but it is men who wrong themselves.

Islahi repeats the verse in his own words without referring explicitly to the concept “the way of God (*allah zara bhi apne bandon par zulm nahin karta balke log khud hi apni janon par zulm dhate hain*, *ibid*, p. 59).⁸³ In conclusion, God’s action in punishing a group of people who reject the Prophet’s message can more correctly be understood as the inevitable consequence of a nation bringing destruction upon itself through its own evildoing.

⁸³ The same idea can be found in Surah *Yunus*, verses 12, 23 and 108.

Conclusions

Islahi places fifteen Surahs from the Meccan and the Median period in Surah Group Three and says that these Surahs all share a common theme ('*umud*). Surah *An Nur*, however, is concerned with matrimonial relationships and other questions arising out of the changed social conditions prevailing in Medina. Besides, Surah *Ibrahim*, which was revealed ten years previously to Surah *An Nur*, has a different focus. Islahi can bring such diverse Surahs together into one Surah Group only by disregarding the multifarious historical conditions in which these diverse Surahs were revealed. It is misleading to say that they all share the same subject matter.

Islahi examines the situation in which the Surah was revealed (*in ayat ke muzul ke daur mein*, *ibid*, p. 66) and describes the atrocious conditions the Muslims had to endure (*is 'aburi daur mein*, *ibid*, p. 81). Islahi claims that the verses themselves provide the details of the social background of the Surah (*is daur mein jo shakhs takht-i-hukumat par tha, wo bhi, jaisa ke ayat ke alfaz se wazeh hai*, *ibid*, p. 79). Islahi says that many verses were directed specifically to the Quraysh and even establishes a direct link between the parables of verses 22-23 and the Quraysh. Further, by highlighting several verses that express consolation and encouragement (*tasalli*) for the Prophet and his followers in these difficult conditions, Islahi wants to prove that his perception of the social and political background of the Surah is correct. One is left with the impression that Islahi is deliberately setting up an argument for his formulation of the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah in terms of victory for the Muslims and the defeat of the Quraysh.

For Islahi, verse 2 is crucial for a correct understanding of this Surah. By means of this verse, Islahi discusses the question of the victory of the believers, which he posited as the main theme ('*umud*) of the Surah. Islahi's analysis does not satisfactorily answer the question as to how this victory can be experienced in this world as well as in the next. The language he uses regarding the success and prosperity promised to the believers remains ambiguous because it moves between a *material, physical* sense of success and prosperity and a *spiritual or emotional* sense of success and prosperity. Islahi gives the impression that the success and prosperity of this world are of the same kind as that which will be experienced in the next world. Moreover, Islahi presents the conflict between success and defeat in terms of

the struggle between truth and falsity, thereby moving beyond the victory of the Muslims in Mecca and raising the discussion to a more universal level.

Islahi rejects modern philosophy (*jadid falsafion ke is nazariya*, ibid, p. 35) according to which mankind began by holding divergent opinions about God and gradually developed to the monotheistic point of view. He proposes his own theory of history on the basis of verse 19, according to which mankind was originally “one single community”. Such a perception of history accounts for the appearance of messengers from God who came to advocate the reformation of society. Islahi develops his theory of history with the use of several key concepts such as “the way of God” (*sunnat-i-ilahi*), the definitive presentation of the arguments for faith (*itimam-i-hujjat*) and the idea that a prophet must depart after completing his task (*'elan-i-harait*). Islahi's view of history is based on his own perception and interpretation of verse 19 (and other verses) and represents one account among other possible interpretations of history. Furthermore, Islahi does not sufficiently take note of the fact that his theory of history is totally dependent on a perception of faith. Other believers may have their own explanations of the development of history.

Surah Hud

Introduction

Islahi reminds the reader that a comprehensive overview of the theme ('umud) of Surah Group Three was provided in the introduction to the previous Surah. Since the present Surah is, according to Islahi's own principles of interpretation (*hamare usul*, vol. 4, p. 97), the second in a pair with the previous one (*surah yunus hi ka musanna hai*, *ibid*), the same kind of theme runs through this Surah as was evident in the previous one. The only significant difference between the two Surahs consists in the way the theme is expressed. In other words, the Surahs differ because of the approach that each Surah takes to the process of argumentation (*ijmal o tafsil aur bahs o istadlal ke 'itibar se donon ka nahj alag alag hai*, *ibid*). The narratives about former nations and peoples, which were presented in summary form in the previous Surah, are given much more detail in the present Surah. Islahi says that the very first verse of the Surah indicates this new focus:

A divine writ (is this), with messages that have been made clear in and by themselves, and have been distinctly spelled out as well – (bestowed upon you) out of the grace of One who is wise, all-aware.

Islahi adds that both the present Surah as well as the previous one have the same Qur'anic names (*alif lam ra*, *ibid*). According to Islahi, the fact that two Surahs have the same name argues in favor of their having the same meaning (*suraton ke nam mein ishtarak in ke matalib ke ishtarak par dalil hai*, *ibid*). Islahi considers these remarks about the theme ('umud) of the Surah to be sufficient (*cf. ibid*). He says that an overview of the meanings of the Surah (*matalib ka tajaziyah*, *ibid*) will highlight the cohesiveness of the Surah (*puri surah bahaisiyat majmu' nigah ke samne a jayegi*, *ibid*).

The Coherence of the Surah

The coherence of the Surah becomes apparent as soon as the meaning of the whole Surah is grasped (*mazamin surah ke is tajaziyah par ek sar sari nazar dalne se bhi andaza ho jayega ke puri surah ek ma'in maqsud par nihayat jami' aur marbut khutbah hai*, *ibid*, p. 100). The coherence of the Surah consists of the way all the verses complement one another, thereby confirming the basic theme and purpose of the Surah. According to Islahi,

the theme ('*umud*) of the present Surah is expressed most clearly in the phrase from verse 49:

for, behold, the future belongs to the God-conscious!

This phrase comes at the end of the historical narrative concerning the victory of Moses and the Israelites and explains why the last Prophet was sent to the Arab people (*jis basharat o inzar ke sath tum apni qaum ke pas aye ho ba'ainhi isi inzar o basharat ke sath allah ne nuh ko un ki qaum ke pas bheja tha*, *ibid*, p. 99). While the Quraysh will experience the same fate if they do not desist in their opposition, the Prophet and his followers will have victory if they remain firm (*anjamkar ki kamyabi khuda se darnewalon hi ko hasil hoti hai*, *ibid*, p. 147).

In fact, whenever the present Surah refers to the narrative of Moses, Islahi draws our attention to this theme ('*umud*) of struggle and ultimate victory or defeat. As verse 110 says:

And, indeed, (similar was the case when) We vouchsafed the divine writ unto Moses, and some of his people set their own views against it.

Islahi understands the verse in the context of the difficulties the last Prophet was having with his people. Hence, this verse encourages and consoles him (*yahan ayat zere bahs tasalli ke maqam mein hai*, *ibid*, p. 174) and promises him the same victory as Moses experienced, provided he remain true to his mission (*jis tara unhone sabr o istiqamat ke sath halat ka muqabla kiya yahan tak ke allah ne inko kamyabi bakhshi isi tarah . . . allah tumhen bhi tumhare mukhalifon par fatahmand karega*, *ibid*). Islahi says that all the historical narratives are meant to bring consolation to the last Prophet. For example, in verse 66 we read:

And so, when Our judgment came to pass, by Our grace We saved *Salih* and those who shared his faith; and (We saved them, too,) from the ignominy of (Our rejection on) that Day (of Resurrection).

According to Islahi, the verse is saying that, just as God saved *Salih* and his companions, God will save the Prophet and his followers (*jis tarah us ne salih ke dushmanon ko zalil o pamal kar ke rakh dia isi tarah tumhare dushmanon ko bhi ek din ruswa kar dega*, *ibid*, p. 154). Islahi finds this message expressly stated in verses like 120:

And (remember:) out of all the accounts relating to the (earlier) apostles We convey unto thee (only) that wherewith We (aim to) make firm thy heart.

In short, by understanding many verses as bringing encouragement, consolation and eventual victory to the Prophet⁸⁴, Islahi finds cohesiveness in this Surah.

The Surahs differ only in the way they describe this recurring theme of coming victory. The previous Surah presented this theme (*'umud*) in an abbreviated form whereas this Surah presents this theme in much more detail. The previous Surah presented the narrative about Moses in great detail while presenting the other historical narratives only briefly. In contrast, the present Surah makes passing reference to the narrative about Moses and highlights the narratives about the other Prophets. Hence, the two Surahs complement each other by forming a pair (*is tarah ye donon suraten mil kar ek dusre ki takmil karti hai aur yahi haqiqat hai suraton ke zauj zauj hone ki*, *ibid*, p. 164). The coherence of the Surah Group consists in the complementary way the Surahs are linked together.

Islahi offers another confirmation of the coherence of the Surah by trying to demonstrate that the text is based on reason. As we read in verse 24:

These two kinds of man may be likened to the blind and deaf and the seeing and hearing. Can these two be deemed alike in (their) nature?

Islahi says that believers are those who use their eyes and ears. For Islahi, this amounts to saying that the message of the Qur'an is based on reason (*quran ki da'wat sar ta sar 'aql o basirat par mubni hai*, *ibid*, p. 120). In fact, the whole universe is a well-ordered, rational system. Islahi's argument is that, since the Qur'an itself repeatedly draws our attention to the way everything in the universe is part of one coherent whole, it follows that the Qur'an itself must be a coherent account. An example can be found in verse 7:

And He it is who has created the heavens and the earth in six aeons; and (ever since He has willed to create life,) the throne of His almightiness has rested upon water.

The words and concepts Islahi uses to reflect on this verse are similar to those he uses for other verses in this Surah Group. He stresses that the world is not a place for childish pastimes (*dunya koi bazicha atfal ya kisi kalindare ka khel tamasha nahin hai*, *ibid*, p. 110).⁸⁵ If the Creator had left

⁸⁴ Other references to the encouragement and consolation the Prophet received are scattered throughout the Surah (cf. *ibid*, p. 112 and p. 115, and p. 143).

⁸⁵ Islahi uses similar words and concepts in his comment on verse 103 (*ye dunya kisi kalindare ka khel nahin hai – balke ye ek 'adl o hakim khuda ki banai hui dunya hai is wajh se zarur hai ke is ke ba'd ek aisa din aye jis mein is ka 'adl kamil zahir ho*, *ibid*, p. 171).

his creation to itself, his work would have been to no purpose (*'abas kam, ibid*), which would have been totally against all logic or reason (*kisi kar 'abas ki nisbat bilkul khilaf 'aql hai, ibid*). Islahi concludes that the Creator has given human beings the freedom to choose the good (*insan ko irade ki azadi aur khair o shar ka imtiyaz de kar, ibid*) and will hold them to account on the Last Day (*ek din apne rab ke age masul aur jawabdeh hoga, ibid*). Islahi's argument is that such a coherent description of the human predicament can only be expressed in a coherent way. Hence, the Qur'an, which presents this account of human life coherently, must be a coherent book.

The Natural Disposition of the Human Heart

In order to strengthen the argument for coherence illustrated by the rational order of the universe, Islahi develops his argument further by analyzing the difference between people who use their reason and those who fail to do this. One of his lengthy discussions on this topic is based on verse 17:

Can, then, (he who cares for no more than the life of this world be compared with) one who takes his stand on a clear evidence from his Sustainer, conveyed through (this) testimony from Him, as was the revelation vouchsafed to Moses aforetime – (a divine writ ordained by Him) to be a guidance and grace (unto man)?

Islahi makes much of the distinction he finds in the verse between those whose natural disposition is blurred or contaminated (*jin ki fitrat ka nur bujh chukka ho, ibid, p. 115*) and those who have managed to keep themselves free of contamination (*jin ki fitrat maskh hone se mahfuz ho, ibid*). According to Islahi, only the latter find that the Qur'an confirms their inner convictions (*jo kuch wo apne dil mein pa rahe hain is ki taid o tasdiq is asmani shahid ki zaban se bhi ho rahi hai, ibid*). The light of inner conviction (*nur-i-fitrat, ibid, p. 116*) is the basis of their faith. It is clear that Islahi wants to draw a clear line between two groups of people, those whose lives are based on this inner light (*nur-i-fitrat*) and those whose convictions are dimmed because they have succumbed to the evil influences around them (*jin ki fitrat kharaj ke bure asarat, ibid*).⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Islahi returns to this topic of natural disposition in verse 31 where he says that those who accept *din* are those who have preserved their inner selves from contamination (*din ki ni'amat hamesha inhi ko nasib hoti hai jin ke dilon mein is ke liye salahiyat hoti hai aur jin ki fitrat maskh hone se mahfuz hoti hai, ibid, p. 139*) and in verse 88, where he repeats the same points (*apni fitrat maskh na kar li ho, ibid, p. 162*)

Islahi continues his analysis by illustrating the existence of this enlightened disposition (*nur-i-fitrat*) in the lives of the Prophets and referring to “the light verse” from Surah *An Nur* (cf. *ibid*). Islahi’s appeal to the inner life of persons to show how the Qur’an confirms the sound dispositions of the heart is presented as another argument for the reasonableness of its message and strengthens his claim that the Qur’an bears witness to an integrated universe and that the Qur’an itself is, therefore, coherent. But how do ordinary human beings in the world keep themselves free of contamination so as to have a share in this light? Islahi says that ordinary people can share in this light by obeying the Prophets (*‘am logon mein se jo log anbiya ki da’wat qabul karne mein sabaqat karte hain wo bhi ‘ala farq maratib is nur se bahra mand hote hain*, *ibid*, p.116).

Islahi develops his notion of natural disposition (*fitrat*) even further in verse 28, where he says that the Prophet’s message would be clear to anyone whose natural disposition is sound (*agar tumhare andar bhi fitrat ki wo roshni maujud hoti jo mere andar hai tab to meri ye da’wat tumhen khud apne dil ki awaz ma’lum hoti*, *ibid*, p. 138). According to the laws of nature (*qudrat ke qanun ke taht*, *ibid*), it is possible to extinguish the voice of one’s inner disposition, thereby rendering oneself incapable of receiving guidance from God. In the last sentence of verse 28 we read:

Can we force it on you even though it be hateful to you?

This phrase confirms Islahi’s basic contention that revelation cannot be superimposed from above without a sound basis in the natural order of the human heart (cf. *ibid*).

Furthermore, Islahi finds an opportunity to stress the human capacity to reach God in his comment on the following phrase from verse 56:

Verily, straight is my Sustainer’s way.

Islahi considers the phrase to be a confirmation of the capacity of human reason and one’s natural disposition to take a person in the direction of God (*mere ‘aql aur mere fitrat ko is se bara-i-rast rabt hai*, *ibid*, p. 149). Set in the context of the custom of idol worship (cf. *ibid*), Islahi says that this verse is a rebuttal of those who strive to reach God through other means such as idols. The way to God is through an upright heart (*is tak pahunchne ke liye ye kafi hai ke main sadiq dil se is ki taraf mutawajah ho jaun*, *ibid*) and Islahi is confident that God has bestowed such a capacity on every human being (*har fitrat-i-salim ke andar allah ta’ala ne wadiy’at farmaya hai*, *ibid*, p. 162).

The Social Context

An important key to finding the meaning of the Surah for Islahi is to investigate the social context in which it was revealed. One of the ways in which he does this is by identifying the social environment of the addressee of the verses. For instance, verse 5 says:

Oh, verily, they (who are bent on denying the truth of this divine writ) are enshrouding their hearts in order to hide from Him.

According to Islahi, this verse is addressed to the Quraysh and describes their response to the message of the Prophet (*ab is ayat mein taswir hai is rawayyah ki jo peghambar ke inzar ke jawab mein mutakbarin quraysh ikhtiyar karte they*, ibid, p. 108). Islahi says that the general reference to “man” (*insan*) in verse 9 is actually a reference to the Quraysh:

And thus it is: if We let man taste some of Our grace

Islahi says that verse 5 has already described the attitude of these members of the Quraysh to the Prophet (*yahan lafz insan agar che 'am hai lekin is se murad hi log hain jin ka zikr upar se a raha hai*, ibid, p. 111). Similarly, for Islahi, we can understand the questions in verse 17, which imply a negative attitude to Qur’anic revelation, because we know the verse is addressed to the Quraysh (*is surah mein mukhatab chunke aslan quraysh hain is wajh se ye guman hota hai ke in ke liye kitab musa ki nazir kuch ziyadah mu'assir nahin ho sakti thi*, ibid, p. 117). Furthermore, Islahi says that verses 18-19, which also describe the Quraysh, were revealed in the same context as verses 17-18 of the preceding Surah and, therefore, deal with the same topic (*yahi mazmun ba'ina isi siyaq o sabaq ke sath . . . quraysh ko quran se sab se ziyadah char is ki da'wat tauhid se hai*, ibid, p. 118). Identifying the Quraysh as the addressees has the effect of integrating the Surah.

A further reason for identifying the Quraysh as the addressee is provided by a characteristic style of the Qur’an through which verses addressed to the Prophet are actually meant for other people (*khitab . . . aslan peghambar ke taraf nahin hota*, ibid, p. 112). Islahi says that this style is most effective (*ye uslub . . . ziyadah mu'assir sabit hota hai*, ibid, p. 118) and is used again in verse 109 (*is ka rukh mukhalifin ki taraf hota hai*, ibid, p. 173). Taking note of this Qur’anic style, Islahi proceeds to describe the situation of those to whom verse 102 is actually directed, which is the situation of the Quraysh (*quraysh ko sunai gayi hai*, ibid, p. 170). Moreover, verse 111 is addressed to the Quraysh and to the Jews as well (*lafz “kul” agarche 'am hai lekin yahan is se murad . . . mushriqin quraysh aur yahud*, ibid, p. 174). Interestingly, Islahi does not include the Muslims as those to whom this

verse may also be addressed. The reason may be that he reads these verses in the light of the theme (*'umud*) according to which the Muslims are promised victory over the Quraysh.

Lessons from History

Another very significant concept with which Islahi unravels the meaning of the Surah is that of history. The historical narratives concerning the Prophets, which are told with some detail in this Surah, act as a mirror (*aina*), in which the Last Prophet and his people see themselves. According to Islahi, the purpose of these narratives is to bring out the similarity between the situations of the past with those of the present and the future (*mazi ke aine mein in hazar aur mustaqbil ka pura naqsha a jaye. tarikh ki jo qadar o qimat hai wo isi pahlui se hai. agar ye pahlui nahon ujal ho jaye to tarikh ki haisiyat mujarad dastan sarai ki rah jati hai*, *ibid*, p. 137). So these narratives are not concerned simply with the past but with the present and the future (*hazar aur mustaqbil*). Islahi seems to be saying that the Surah is neither a work of historical analysis, nor does it indulge in story telling (*dastan sarai*) but presents a clear action-plan (*naqsha*) for its addressees living in the present (that is, at the time of revelation).

Based on this emphasis on the present and the future, Islahi makes a clear distinction between the two kinds of punishment (*'azab do qismon ka hota hai*, *ibid*, p. 141) that he finds in verse 39:

But in time you will come to know who it is that (in this world) shall be visited by suffering which will cover him with ignominy, and upon whom long lasting- suffering shall alight (in the life to come).

Islahi says that the first kind of punishment is intended to shake people out of their negligence (*jis ka maqsud ghafalin o munkarin ko jagana aur jhanjhorna hota hai*, *ibid*) and to bring them some kind of awareness (*in ko agah kar raha hai*, *ibid*). The second kind of punishment is the destruction that comes only after the Prophet has completed his mission (*kamil itimam hujjat ke ba'd*, *ibid*).

Both kinds of punishment seem to have the same basic purpose, namely, as Islahi himself puts it, to provide a lesson for coming generations (*ta ke ane wali naslen bhi in ke injam se sabaq hasil karen*, *ibid*). For example, the punishment that the people of Lot received was of the final, decisive kind, yet the phrase in verse 89: "the people of Lot lived not very far from you", seems to indicate that this historical narrative was meant to be a reminder to

those negligent people for whom there was still some hope of reform. In other words, it is a warning given in the form of a provocation (*jagana aur jhanjhorna*) in order to shake people out of their lethargy. It is not simply an account of the destruction that came after the final warning had been given (*itimam hujjat ke ba'd*). The problem seems to be that Islahi has limited his discussion to the Quraysh.

We find another example of the nature of punishment in the words of *Shu'ayb* to his people. As Islahi says, *Shu'ayb* told them that he was not bringing them news about the past but about their present condition (*ye na samjho ke main tumhen sirf mazi ba'id ke afsane suna raha hun balke tumhare mazi qarib aur tumhare qarb o jauwar ki shahadat bhi yahi hai*, *ibid*, p. 163). It seems clear that all the historical narratives in the Surah are addressed to people in their present surroundings and for their immediate benefit. All the punishment narratives, without distinction, share this same function.

We could find many illustrations of Islahi's focus on the time of revelation. For example, Islahi proceeds to draw various lessons for the addressees of the Surah. He says that verse 59 is addressed to the Quraysh:

And that was (the end of the tribe of) 'Ad.

The verse is meant to remind them that the evidence of history should be enough to inform them of what they can expect to happen if they do not change their ways (*quraysh ko ye dikana hai ke . . . koi wajh nahin hai ke jis tarah ka ma'amla allah ta'ala ne in ke sath kiya isi tarah ka ma'amla wo tumhare sath na kare*, *ibid*, pp. 120-121). Islahi says that the same message is contained in the phrase from verse 93:

Watch, then, (for what is coming:) behold, I shall watch with you.

Here the Prophet *Shu'ayb* is reflecting on the evidence of history and concludes that all the signs now indicate that his people are about to be punished by God (*tum bhi mustahaq 'azab hone ki sari 'alamaten namudar ho chuki hain*, *ibid*, p. 164). However, Islahi says that the general impression one gets from these historical narratives is that most people about whom these narratives were written did not heed the message of the Prophets (*anbiya ki qaumon ka ma'amla bil 'umum is ke bar'ks raha hai*, *ibid*, p. 152). Islahi fails to show how this conclusion is not meant simply to add to our knowledge of history but is a message that is addressed by the Qur'an to people living in the world today.

So far, Islahi's reflections have been limited to the time of revelation. But at this point he makes an unusual comment by extending the significance of the

historical narratives to the contemporary world. The people of *Madyan* as well as the Quraysh were offered the choice to reform or to perish. Islahi says that the same choice is presented to people today (*is dunya mein insan ke liye wohi raste hain*, *ibid*, p. 151). Islahi says there is a specific limit that people of all historical periods (*koi qaum*) may not cross (*agar koi qaum apne hudud se guzar jati hai to ek khas had tak muhlat dene ke ba'd is ko drust bhi kar deta hai*, *ibid*, p. 150).⁸⁷ Basing himself on the historical narratives related in this Surah describing what happened to specific groups of people, Islahi presents a universal law of history.

Different Kinds of Language

In his introductory comments, Islahi observed that the theme ('*umud*) of the Surahs in Surah Group Three do not differ markedly from one another but that the language and style used is different from one Surah to the next (*na'fs 'umud mein donon ke darmiyan kuch aise farq nahin hai, albata ijmal o tafsil aur bahs o istadlal ke 'itibar se donon ka nahj alag alag hai*, *ibid*, p. 97). Islahi illustrates the importance of style in his discussion of the meaning of verse 87:

Said they: "O *Shu'ayb*! Does thy (habit of) praying compel thee to demand of us that we give up all that our forefathers were wont to worship, or that we refrain from doing whatever we please with our possessions?

Islahi reminds the reader of the teasing style in which the people of *Madyan* said these words to their Prophet (*ye pura fiqrah tanziyah andaz mein hai*, *ibid*, p. 161).

Islahi also indicates the style of expression used in verses 71-72, in which Abraham's wife expresses her joy and astonishment at the announcement that she would bear a child:

And his wife, standing (nearby), laughed (with happiness); whereupon We gave her the glad tiding of (the birth of) Isaac and, after Isaac, of (his son) Jacob.

Said she: "Oh, woe is me! Shall I bear a child, now that I am an old woman and this husband of mine is an old man? Verily, that would be a strange thing indeed!"

⁸⁷ Islahi finds this message in verse 85, which is a warning to the people of *Madyan* to act justly. Islahi says that their corruption will be tolerated only for a set time fixed by God and, after that time is over, they will be destroyed (*zamin ka khaliq o malik bas ek khas had hi tak muhlat deta hai. is muhlat ke guzarte hi wo aise mufasadin se apni zamin ko pak kar deta hai*, *ibid*, p. 161).

Islahi says that the style used here expresses various emotions (*gonā gonā jazbat ka mazhar thiy. is ta'jjub ka izhar unhone jin lafzon mein farmaya is ka hawala age a raha hai*, ibid, p. 155). Islahi explains that the words of Abraham's wife, Sarah, are a feminine expression of amazement (*wo khas niswani andaz mein bolin . . . ye fiqrah izhar-i-ta'jjub ka hai*, ibid, p. 156) and the angels who bring the glad tidings are also aware that Sarah's words are an expression of amazement (cf. ibid).

A further indication of Islahi's sensitivity to the style or mood of a passage is his comment that Abraham was "naturally" (*kudratan*, ibid, p. 155) disturbed by the fact that his guests did not begin to enjoy the meal he had prepared for them. Islahi's intuition leads him to conclude that Abraham was "naturally" upset. Moreover, Islahi stresses that the style of verse 104 expresses neither exaggeration nor divine knowledge but is simply the reporting of a fact (*na koi mubalagha ka uslub bayan hai aur na ye bat 'ilm ilahi ke 'itibar se irshad hui hai balke ye ek haqiqat nafs alamri ka izhar hai*, ibid, p. 172). Islahi finds confirmation for his view in the *hadith* (cf. ibid). This is an example of the way Islahi makes selective use of the *hadith* according to his own purposes.

Connected with different kinds of style is the different ways language is used. Islahi suggests that the phrase about the six days or aeons in verse 7 is an example of a figurative use of language:

And He it is who has created the heavens and the earth in six aeons and (ever since He has willed to create life,) the throne of His almightiness has rested upon water.

In other words, the reference to six days is not to be understood as we ordinarily understand it (*che dinon se ye hamare din murad nahin hain balke khudai din murad hain*, ibid, p. 109). Six days could refer to a thousand years or could simply refer to periods of time (*ham in ko adwar se ta'bir kar sakte hain*, ibid). The language used here simply has a point to make (*is haqiqat ko zahir karta hai*, ibid).

Islahi proceeds to describe this reality in words that he uses elsewhere in his commentary. He says the gradual appearance of the world "in six periods" (*ye dunya ka che adwar mein darja badarja zahur mein ana*, ibid) gives expression to the deliberate and wise planning of the Creator (*khaliq ne iradah, skim, tartib aur hikmat ke sath is ko wujud bakhsha hai*, ibid). The point to note is that these words are meant to convey truth in a symbolic way. Islahi has a similar figurative approach to the other phrase mentioned

in the verse: “the throne of His almightiness”, saying that these words express the governance of God (*khuda ki hukumat ki ta'bir hai*, *ibid*).

On the other hand, Islahi does not progress very far beyond a literal translation of the text for several verses of the Surah. For instance, we read in verse 5:

Oh, verily, they (who are bent on denying the truth of this divine writ) are enshrouding their hearts in order to hide from Him.

By saying that the phrase “enshrouding their hearts” is similar in meaning to “hiding oneself under clothes” (*is ko istighshah siyab se ta'bir firmaya hai*, *ibid*, p. 108), Islahi has given no more than a physical or material meaning to the phrase. Likewise, Islahi understands other verses, which would also seem to be using figurative language, in a similar *prima facie*, way. For example, verse 82:

And so, when Our judgment came to pass, We turned those (sinful towns) upside down, and rained down upon them stone-hard blows of chastisement pre-ordained, one upon another.

Islahi simply translates the phrase about the stones of *sijjil* (*hijarah min sijjil*), as “*sang-i-gil* stones that rained down” (*sang-i-gil ke barish ki*, *ibid*, p. 134), without investigating the possibility that the reference to these stones may be symbolic (cf. *ibid*, p. 159). It seems to me that such phrases in the Qur'an demand greater sensitivity to the use of literary style.⁸⁸

Islahi is also reluctant to allow that the historical narratives employ a figurative use of language. In verses 25-26, for instance, the Prophet Noah announces his message:

And indeed, (it was with the same message that) We sent forth Noah unto his people: “Behold, I come unto you with the plain warning that you may worship none but God – for, verily, I fear lest suffering befall you on a grievous Day!”

The core of this passage, for Islahi, is the fact that the Prophet Noah comes among his people as “a person with a clear warning” (*nazirun mubin*). Islahi insists that the message of the Prophet Noah is not given with the aid of comparisons or approximations. The Prophet's message consists of the announcement of an actual occurrence (*is ki nau'iiyyat qiyasat aur andazon par mubni isharat o kinayat ki nahin hoti balke ek wazeh aur qat'i khabar aur 'elan ki hoti hai*, *ibid*, p. 136). According to Islahi, the fact that the announcement is based on factual evidence must mean that the language used in this narrative is also of a direct reporting style (*goya apni donon*

⁸⁸ Muhammad Asad translates the phrase as “stone-hard blows of chastisement”. Asad (1980), p. 328.

angkhon se is ko dekh raha hai, ibid). Apparently, for Islahi, a figurative use of language would destroy the force of the warning contained in the historical narratives of the Prophets.

Furthermore, the words: “heavenly blessings” referred to in verse 52, apparently refer to earthly power and government *in this world*:

He will shower upon you heavenly blessings abundant, and will add strength to your strength.

Islahi states that “heavenly blessings” are words that express sustenance and prosperity (*rizq o fazal mein ziyadati ki ta'bir hai*, ibid, p. 148) and the phrase: “will add strength to your strength” refers to political power and might (*siyasi quwwat o shaukat mein izafa ki taraf ishara hai*, ibid). In fact, a nation that turns to God will be powerful in the four corners of the world (*allah ta'ala is ke liye asman o zamin sab ki barkaton ke darwaze khol deta hai aur chahar dang 'alam par is ki hukumat qaim ho jati hai*, ibid).

Islahi understands these words of the Prophet *Hud* in a physical, material way whereas they could also be understood in a more figurative or spiritual way. Islahi goes on to say that these blessings are a result of a social or collective turning to God (*ye ijtam'i tauba ki barkaten bayan hui hain*, ibid), though he adds that an individual turning to God will also receive such blessings (cf. ibid). Islahi makes a final remark to the effect that turning towards God will bring peace and satisfaction (*sakinat o tamaniyat ki lazawal badshahat bakhshita hai*, ibid). However, Islahi does not succeed in removing the ambiguity over the nature of these blessings. Is this a reference to material power and prosperity or to something more internal or spiritual?

A similar ambiguity surrounds the “goodly sustenance” referred to in verse 88:

I am taking my stand on a clear evidence from my Sustainer, who has vouchsafed me goodly sustenance (as a gift) from Himself.

Islahi says the words “goodly sustenance” are linked to the words “grace from Himself” mentioned in verse 63, which is a reference to the divine revelation given directly to the Prophet (*wahi ilahi ki ta'lim*, ibid, p. 153). Here, the words denote the divine revelation (*wahi ilahi ko “rizq husn” se ta'bir*, ibid, p. 162) that *Shu'ayb* received from God. Islahi is quite clear that the words refer to spiritual and not material sustenance and even quotes the saying from Jesus that “man does not live from bread alone” (cf. ibid) to confirm his spiritual interpretation of these words. In contrast to his

emphasis on the spiritual nature of the “goodly sustenance”, however, Islahi says that the rest of the verse is an effort by the Prophet *Shu'ayb* to convince his people that he is not trying to capture the market by preaching against their business practices (*is tarah tumhen bazaar se be dakhil kar ke khud bazaar par qabiz ban baitun*, *ibid*). So the context could suggest that *Shu'ayb* had no need to capture the market because he was blest with abundant material sustenance. However, comparison with the usage of similar words in earlier verses of this Surah (verse 17, verse 28 and verse 63) persuades Islahi to hold fast to his spiritual interpretation of the “goodly sustenance” mentioned above.

Finally, since the style used in the Surah is indicative of its meaning, would it not be useful to investigate the style used in those verses that describe the horror of final punishment in hell? Verse 106 is a typical example of the vivid language used to describe such punishment:

Now as for those who (by their deeds) will have brought wretchedness upon themselves, (they shall live) in the fire, where they will have (nothing but) moans and sobs (to relieve their pain).

Islahi suggests that the language used here is a very clear expression of the suffering and disdain experienced in hell (*ye dozakhiyon ke chikhne chalne aur rone khaghiyane ki ta'bir hai aur in lafzon mein jo hiqarat ka pahlua hai wo bilkul wazeh hai*, *ibid*). However, since the reference to hell is a reference to things beyond the reach of human perception, it would have been better to mention that the suffering described in this verse (and in other similar verses) is of a different order than the suffering experienced in this world. Hence, the style used to describe it cannot be compared with the style used earlier to describe the joy and amazement of Abraham's wife, Sarah. Instead of investigating the possibility that the style used in these verses about hell is an expression of the gravity or seriousness of the Day of Judgment, Islahi says the verse is simply a description of the actual, physical suffering that awaits the unbelievers. Islahi prefers to take these verses at their face value, in a *prima facie* way.

The Way of God

Another key to understanding the coherence of the Qur'an is the concept Islahi calls “the way of God” (*sunnat-i-ilahi*). Islahi finds a clear statement of this concept in verse 117:

For, never would thy Sustainer destroy a community for wrong (beliefs done) so long as its people behave righteously (towards one another).

Islahi explains that God would never destroy a community if, as a whole, the community is on the way to reform (*sunnat ilahi . . . nahin hai ke wo kisi qaum ko in ke kisi zulm ki padash mein halak kar de jab ke is ke bashinde bahaisiyat-i-majmu'i islah karne wali hon*, *ibid*, p. 177). Punishment comes only when there are no reformers left in the community or when their number is negligible (cf. *ibid*) and is based not on individual wrongdoing but on community depravity ('*azab ilahi isi waqt nazil hota hai jab majmu'a ka mizaj fasad ho jata hai*, *ibid*). Hence, it is according to "the way of God" to deliver the Prophet *Hud* from the unbelievers and to punish them when the time has come (*allah ta'ala ne apni sunnat ke mutabiq*, *ibid*, p. 151).

The concept of "the way of God" can thus usefully be used to explain the way God sends his messengers successively to each nation, as related, for example, in verse 25:

And indeed, (it was with the same message that) We sent forth Noah unto his people.

Islahi comments that the Prophet Noah appeared as demanded by "the way of God" (*sunnat ilahi ka taqaza hai*, *ibid*, p. 136). Subsequent historical narratives are introduced in a similar way in the Surah, for example, verse 50:

And unto (the tribe of) 'Ad (We sent) their brother *Hud*,
and verse 84:

And unto (the people of) *Madyan* (We sent) their brother *Shu'ayb*.

Islahi says that each of these Prophets completed his mission to provide complete and convincing arguments (*itimam hujjat*, *ibid*, p. 160) for the people to whom they were sent⁸⁹, since it is according to "the way of God" to send each nation a Prophet who will communicate to them complete and convincing arguments about their responsibility to God (*ye sunnat ilahi rahi hai ke har qaum ki taraf allah ta'ala ne inhi mein se rasul bheja ta ke . . . hujjat tamam kare*, *ibid*, p. 147). The concept *sunnat ilahi* is thus a key to understand verse 57:

But if you choose to turn away, then (know that) I have delivered to you the message with which I was sent unto you, and (that) my

⁸⁹ Islahi makes frequent use of the concept *itimam hujjat* or *hujjat tamam* and gives the same explanation for the concept in each different context within the Surah. Cf. *ibid*, pp. 107, 139, 141 and pp. 158-159. His constant use of this concept could strengthen his claim that the Qur'an is coherent.

Conclusions

Islahi begins by saying that this Surah is the second of a pair with the previous Surah (*surah yunus hi ka musanna hai*, ibid, p. 97) and that, therefore, both of these Surahs have the same theme. The only way the Surahs differ is in the way theme is presented. Such a remark can be made with respect to many other Surahs, all of which may have a similar theme but differ only in the style of presentation. To divide the Qur'an into preliminary and supplementary Surahs based on thematic coherence is an artificial division because all the Surahs of the Qur'an present the same basic message using different styles of expression.

Furthermore, Islahi does not present a convincing argument for the view that the preliminary letters, *alif*, *lam*, *mim*, represent the Qur'anic name of the Surah. If this were true, many Surahs in the Qur'an would share the same name.

Islahi stresses that the historical narratives related in this Surah are set against the background of the conflict between the Prophet and the Quraysh (*isi siyaq o sabaq ke sath . . . quraysh ko quran se sab se ziyadah char is ki da'wat tauhid se hai*, ibid, p. 118). The Surah is coherent because all the verses complement one another to confirm the basic theme and purpose for which the Surah was revealed (*puri surah ek ma'in maqsud par nihayat jam' aur marbut khutbah hai*, ibid, p. 100). Islahi's notion of the coherence of the Surah depends on his pre-conceived notion of its theme ('*umud*).

Islahi says the Surah differs from the previous one only in the detailed way this Surah presents the argument (*ijmal o tafsil aur bahs o istadlal ke 'itibar se donon ka nahj alag alag hai*, ibid, p. 97). One characteristic style of the Qur'an is the way in which verses addressed to the Prophet are actually meant for other people (*ye uslub . . . ziyadah mu'assir sabit hota hai*, ibid, p. 118). These narratives are not concerned simply with the past but with the present and the future (*hazar aur mustaqbil*) and provide an action plan (*naqsha*) for its addressees living in the present. In fact, Islahi seems to present a universal law of history by referring to people of all historical periods (*agar koi qaum apne hudud se guzar jati hai*, ibid, p. 150). However, his emphasis on the reporting style used in the historical narratives of this Surah (*goya apni donon angkhon se is ko dekh raha hai*, ibid, p. 136) limits these narratives to a physical or material description of the events.

Islahi moves back and forth between a literal, *prima facie* reading and a more figurative, symbolic interpretation of the verses. Although Islahi says that the reference to the six periods in verse 7 must not be understood literally, it remains another expression of time. He feels it is a simple statement of fact and not hyperbole to say that Abraham was upset (*na koi mubalagha ka uslub bayan hai*, *ibid*, p. 172). Moreover, the “heavenly blessings” of verse 52 refer to political power and might in this world (*siyasi quwwat o shaukat mein izafa ki taraf isharah hai*, *ibid*, p. 148). Further, Islahi insists that “goodly sustenance” of verse 88 be given a spiritual interpretation. He uses the same kind of language to describe the suffering of hell mentioned in verse 106 as he uses to describe the amazement of Abraham’s wife, Sarah. His emphasis on the literal interpretation of the warnings contained in the historical narratives, however, make it impossible for him to articulate the universal message of the Surah.

The coherence of the Qur’an flows from the natural disposition of the human heart (*har fitrat-i-salim*, *ibid*, p. 162). Islahi uses the concept of human nature (*fitrat*) to divide humanity into two groups: those whose lives are based on an inner light (*nur-i-fitrat*, *ibid*, p. 116) and those who succumb to the evil influences of the world (*jin ki fitrat kharaj ke bure asarat*, *ibid*). Islahi’s theory of human nature over-simplifies the complexity of the human predicament in society and it is based on a selective reading of the Surah.

Islahi develops the concept he calls “the way of God” (*sunnat-i-ilahi*) because it provides a coherent synthesis of the historical narratives. However, it seems to me that the concept of “the way of God” would have been more complete if Islahi had included those verses that highlight other aspects of the way God deals with human beings in the world. For instance, note the last part of verses 106-107, in which Allah qualifies the punishment in store for unbelievers:

Now as for those who (by their deeds) will have brought wretchedness upon themselves, (they shall live) in the fire, where they will have (nothing but) moans and sobs (to relieve their pain), therein to abide as long as the heavens and the earth endure – *unless thy Sustainer wills it otherwise: for, verily, thy Sustainer is a sovereign doer of whatever He wills.*⁹⁰

Other verses like verse 90, which stresses God’s forgiveness and love, could have been included as well:

⁹⁰ I have emphasized some words of these verses with italics.

Hence, ask your Sustainer to forgive you your sins, and then turn towards Him in repentance – for, verily, my Sustainer is a dispenser of grace, a fount of love!

Islahi could have presented the concept of “the way of God” in a more balanced way by including the verses of the Qur’an that emphasize how *human beings* bring suffering and punishment upon themselves.⁹¹ In short, Islahi has made a selective choice of verses with which to develop his concept of “the way of God”. He has not followed his own directive to include parallel verses (*nazair*) in his discussion of the meaning of this concept. Another reader of the Qur’an would be able to understand “the way of God” from a different point of view by referring to different verses. Yet Islahi presents his version of “the way of God” as the only correct one.

⁹¹ For example, verse 101 states that human beings “wronged themselves” and verse 116 says that they “lost themselves in sinning”.

Surah Yusuf

Introduction

Once again, Islahi begins by referring to the overall theme ('*umud*) of the Surah Group. At the start of his discussion of the present Surah, he recalls what he had already written in the introduction to Surah Group Three. According to Islahi, reflection on the Surahs of this Surah Group will result in the distinct impression that the main reality with which all these Surahs are concerned is to make clear, from various points of view and by means of different styles, that victory (*kamyabi o fatahmandi*, vol. 4, p. 183) in the struggle between truth and falsity, instigated by the Prophet, will go to the Prophet and to those who follow him and, conversely, a most humiliating defeat (*zillat o hazimat*, *ibid*) will be the lot of the Quraysh. In other words, the Surahs deliver a warning to the Quraysh and announce good tidings for the Prophet and his followers.

It should be clear to the Quraysh from the evidence of reason and nature, as well as from the evidence of living beings in the universe and from the witness of history and the laws of creation ('*aql o fitrat, afaq o anfus ke dalail aur tarikh o nazam kainat ke shawahid*, *ibid*) that truth is on the side of the Prophet and his followers (*haq tumhare pas a chuka hai*, *ibid*) and that those who oppose him will very soon experience the evil consequences of their opposition. The Prophet and his followers are, in turn, encouraged to be patient and to hold fast to the truth because it will eventually lead them to success and prosperity (*haq ko le kar tum ute ho anjamkar ki kamyabi o ferozmandi*, *ibid*). Moreover, it is according to the way of God (*sunnat ilahi*) that the triumph of truth must be preceded by many trials and difficulties (*haq ko ghalba aur kamyabi ki manzil tak pahunchne ke liye azmaish ke mukhtalif marhalon se guzarana parta hai*, *ibid*). Hence, the believers will also have to experience similar trials. If they endure these trials with steadfastness they will taste success both in this world and in the next (*dunya aur akhirat donon mein kamyabi tumhara hi hissah hai*, *ibid*). As verse 27 of Surah Ibrahim says:

God grants firmness unto those who have attained to faith through the word that is unshakably true in the life of this world as well as in the life to come; but the wrongdoers He lets go astray: for God does whatever He wills.

Islahi says that, in order to communicate this theme (*'umud*), the previous two Surahs provided detailed narratives about the lives of the Prophets and the peoples among whom they lived. Moreover, the purpose of relating all these narratives (*sar guzashton ke sunane ka ye maqsud bayan farmaya gaya hai*, *ibid*) is conveyed to the Prophet in verses 120-122 of the previous Surah, namely, Surah *Hud*:

And (remember:) out of all the accounts relating to the (earlier) apostles We convey unto thee (only) that wherewith We (aim to) make firm thy heart: for through these (accounts) comes the truth unto thee, as well as an admonition and a reminder unto all believers.

And say unto those who will not believe: "Do anything that may be within your power, (while) we, behold, shall labour (in God's way); and wait (for what is coming): behold, we too are waiting!"

Islahi says that Surah *Yusuf* has precisely the same purpose (*ba'ainihi yahi maqsud*, *ibid*, p. 184) as the narratives have that are contained in the previous two Surahs. The only difference is that the previous two Surahs contain several narratives about the Prophets whereas the whole of the present Surah is taken up by only one narrative. Islahi says the narrative in Surah *Yusuf* is an extremely fine one (*behterin sar guzasht*, *ibid*) and verse 90 contains a phrase that provides a summary of the whole Surah:

Verily, if one is conscious of Him and patient in adversity – behold, God does not fail to requite the doers of good!

According to Islahi, it seems that the purpose of Surah *Yusuf* is to confirm the message of Surah *Hud* by providing an historical example of what Surah *Hud* had said in verses 120-122 about the purpose of the historical narratives (*goya surah hud ke ba'd surah yusuf isi haqiqat ko mubarhan karne ke liye ek tarikhi shadat hai*, *ibid*). In other words, the historical example provided by the Prophet Joseph is meant to strengthen and confirm the last Prophet in his own mission.

The Theme of the Surah

In the opening verses of the Surah, Islahi finds confirmation of the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah Group. Verse 3 reads:

In the measure that We reveal this Qur'an unto thee, (O Prophet,) We explain it to thee in the best possible way, seeing that ere this thou wert indeed among those who are unaware (of what revelation is).

Islahi says that the narrative related in this Surah is a clear statement of the last Prophet's own mission (*ap ki risalat ki ek nihayat wazeh dalil hai*, *ibid*,

p. 189) and that it is a mirror (*ek aina*) for the Prophet in which he could observe the ups and downs of life and see them in the perspective of the ultimate victory that is coming (*is mein ap ko ap ke hazar aur mustaqbil ka pura naqsha dekha dia gaya*, *ibid*).

Furthermore, Islahi says that the dream of Joseph is a sign of the blessings of the perfect religion (*din*) that was to be revealed later. As verse 6 says:

For, (as thou hast been shown in thy dream,) even thus will thy Sustainer elect thee, and will impart unto thee some understanding of the inner meaning of happenings, and will bestow the full measure of His blessings upon thee and upon the House of Jacob.

Islahi says the blessings mentioned in this verse are a reference to the religion revealed by God (*ni'mat se murad din o shar' ke ni'mat hai*, *ibid*, p. 192). Other blessings can only be considered as an added blessing and the dream of Joseph is the glad tidings of this most precious of all blessings (*tum ne jo rawayyih dekhi hai wo isi itimam ni'mat ki basharat hai*, *ibid*).

The story related in this Surah is not just a story but provides answers to the problems that the preaching of Islam was posing for many people (*jo da'wat islami ke is daur mein*, *ibid*, p. 195). Islahi says the previous two Surahs had already described the triumph of truth and the defeat of falsity in many different ways and styles (*haq ke ghalba aur batil ki hazimat ka mazmun mukhtalif uslubon se bayan hua hai*, *ibid*, p. 196). Since the whole nation was experiencing oppression at the time this message was being proclaimed (*pure mulk par is tarah kufr ki tariki chai hui thiy*, *ibid*), it was not easy to convey a message that spoke of the utter defeat of those who were now causing so much misery (*ek din ayega ke ye tamam mutamarridin is ke age gutne tek kar is se raham o karam ki iltijayen karenge*, *ibid*).

Furthermore, the Quraysh were invited to recognize their own future and that of the Prophet in the narrative related in this Surah (*wo chahen to is sar guzasht mein apna mustaqbil bhi dekh len aur is peghambar ka mustaqbil bhi dekh len*, *ibid*, p. 201). In the phrase from verse 52:

God does not bless with His guidance the artful schemes of those who betray their trust,

Islahi finds the theme (*'umud*) expressed yet again, for the phrase states clearly that those who do wrong will not be successful whereas those who are faithful will achieve their purpose in life (*wohi sar kharo aur bamurad hote hain*, *ibid*, p. 225). Moreover, on the basis of verse 56, which states that God

established Joseph securely in the land (of Egypt): he had full mastery over it, Islahi says that God will reward, even in this life, those who prove faithful in time of trial (*is dunya mein bhi is ka sila deta hai*, ibid, p. 238), but Islahi does not qualify the nature of this worldly success any further. Islahi makes the same comment on the phrase from verse 90, which has a very similar message:

Verily, if one is conscious of Him and patient in adversity – behold, God does not fail to requite the doers of good.

Islahi says that this verse is an explicit statement of the theme ('*umud*) that has been developing since the outset (*yahi haqiqat is sari sar guzasht ki ruh hai aur ham sharu' mein 'arz kar chuke hain ke is ko is surah ke 'umud ki haisiyat bhi hasil hai*, ibid, p. 250).

Islahi sees a final reference to the theme ('*umud*) in verse 92, which says that Joseph was willing to forgive his brothers. Since the last Prophet used similar words to forgive the Quraysh in Mecca once he had conquered it (*fatah makka ke din quraysh ke in sar ghanon ko khitab kar ke farmaye jo barabar ap ki dushmani mein sar garm rahe they*, ibid, p. 251), this verse should be interpreted in terms of the future victory of Mecca.

The Social Context

Islahi describes the social context in such a way that it confirms the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah. He frequently identifies the Quraysh as the addressees of verses. For example, Islahi says that the Quraysh are addressed in the very first two verses:

These are messages of a revelation clear in itself and clearly showing the truth: behold, We have bestowed it from on high as a discourse in the Arabic tongue, so that you might encompass it with your reason.

Though the verses are addressed to people in general, Islahi says that the specific addressees are the Quraysh (*khitaab ahl 'arab se 'umuman aur quraysh se khas taur par hai*, ibid, p. 188). Similarly, though the next verse is addressed to the Prophet, it expresses a warning for the Quraysh as well (*quraysh ki tanbih*, ibid). Moreover, the phrase from verse 21:

For, God always prevails in whatever be His purpose: but most people know it not,

is another indication that this whole narrative is meant also for the Quraysh, who could, if they wished, see in it their own future (*ye sari sar guzasht quraysh ko sunai ja rahi hai aur . . . wo chahen to is sar guzasht mein apna mustaqbil bhi dekh len*, ibid, p. 201).

According to Islahi, the incident about the King's drinking cup, which was placed in the camel-pack of Benjamin (verses 70-76), is another reminder to the Quraysh that they should not be misled by the present circumstances surrounding the Prophet. For only God knows what lies in the future and only God can bring a solution to a situation overcome by darkness (*maujuda tarikion ke andar se kis tarah roshni baramad hogi aur islam aur peghambar islam ke liye kis tarah rahen hamwar hongy*, ibid, p. 245). Islahi comments on the incident by giving ten specific observations based on the Islamic categories of *haram* and *halal* (cf. ibid, pp. 243-244). The reader gets the impression that Islahi is discussing the incident in the light of the triumph of the Prophet and of Islam over the Quraysh that took place subsequently.

In the last part of the Surah (verses 102-111), God wants to console the Prophet by reminding him not to be too concerned about the way people were rejecting his message (*apne ap ko itna parishan kiyun rako*, ibid, p. 257). These verses also represent a threat aimed at the Quraysh, who will suffer the same fate as their predecessors if they do not take note of the lessons contained in the historical narratives (*agar unhone qaumon ki tarikh se sabaq na liya*, ibid, p. 255). In this way, Islahi highlights the conflict between the Prophet and his opponents, thereby setting the stage for the final outcome.

Natural Disposition

In several places throughout the Surah, Islahi appeals to the use of reason. For example, Islahi considers verses 37-40, which contain the exhortation that Joseph made to his companions in prison, as an appeal to sound reason and to human nature. The argument is that there is no evidence for false deities by an appeal to reason (*na hamari 'aql mein, na hamari fitrat mein*, ibid, p. 219). However, he seems to transcend the specific context by assuming that people use reason in the same way in all places and in all circumstances (*yahi insan ki fitrat hai*, ibid). Islahi makes the broad generalization that true religion is a religion of natural disposition (*yahi sidha, mustaqim aur fitri din hai*) and that other religions are not in accordance with human nature (*is ke 'alawah jitne bhi tariqe hain sab fitrat-i-insani se hote hue*, ibid, p. 220). He does not support his assertion with evidence.

Islahi discusses how Joseph overcomes his temptation in terms of his natural capacity. As we read in verse 24:

And, indeed, she desired him, and he desired her; (and he would have succumbed) had he not seen (in this temptation) an evidence of his Sustainer's truth: thus (We willed it to be) in order that We might avert from him all evil and all deeds of abomination – for, behold, he was truly one of Our servants.

Islahi says that every human being has been endowed with *burhan* (evidence of the truth) as a natural disposition (*burhan-i-rab se murad wo nur yazdani hai jo allah ta'ala har insan ki fitrat ke andar wadi'at farmata hai*, *ibid*, p. 206). It is according to “the way of God” (*sunnat ilahi*, *ibid*) that He guides and strengthens only those who appreciate this natural disposition and that He seals the hearts of those who give it no importance (*akhlaqi 'itibar se bilkul hi andha bahra bana kar chaur deti hai*, *ibid*).⁹² Joseph was able to overcome this most serious temptation because he drew strength from his natural disposition (*apne nur-i-firat ki nigrani karte hain*, *ibid*, p. 207). Islahi explains this verse by using psychological concepts to move beyond the social and political context.

Different Kinds of Language

The first point to note is that, at least with regard to the first three Surahs of this Surah Group, Islahi distinguishes between the matter or subject of the Surah and the style or way it is expressed (*in mein asl mauzu' bahs ek hi hai albata andaz-i-bahs aur mauad-i-istadlal har ek mein alag alag hai*, *ibid*, p. 188). The point to note is the influence this distinction may have on the meaning he draws from the text. For the difference in style from one Surah to the next is likely to have an impact on its meaning. Yet Islahi simply disregards this possibility and claims that the topic or subject matter for all the Surahs remains one and the same even though the style they use is very different.

A second point is the assertion that *no external sign* is needed to confirm the truth of this revelation (*is kitab ki sadaqat ki gowahi ke liye kisi kharaji mu'ajaze ya nishani ki zarurat nahin hai*, *ibid*) since its truth is as self

⁹² Islahi mentions the concept “the way of God” (*sunnat ilahi*) in several other places as well. In this context, he uses the concept to stress that God guides those who, like Joseph, use their freedom to do good and to overcome temptations (cf. *ibid*, pp. 225-226). In the context of verse 111, Islahi says that “the way of God” is to punish nations only after the Prophet has completed his mission (*rasulon ke zara'e se logon par apni hujjat puri karta hai*, *ibid*, p. 259). This concept is given more prominence in other Surahs.

evident as the sun (*suraj ki tarah roshan dalail khud is ke andar hi maujud hain*, *ibid*) provided people approach it with an open heart.⁹³ In contrast with this assertion, however, Islahi constantly resorts to the conquest of Mecca by the Muslims to confirm the theme (*'umud*) of this Surah Group. Yet this is a specific event that occurred in history. Islahi finds both explicit and implicit references to this event throughout the Surahs of this Surah Group. As a result, Islahi may have unwittingly provided an historical event as a substitute for the miracles and signs that the opponents of the Prophet were demanding.

Islahi alludes to the metaphorical character of the truths contained in Joseph's dream and to the appropriate mental capacity needed to understand them (*rauya mein haqaiq majaz ki shakal mein zahir hote hain jin ko samajhna ek khas zahini munasabat ka muqtadi hai*, *ibid*, p. 192). Presumably, he would not say the same thing about the Prophet's experience of revelation, though the Qur'an also presents many truths in figurative language and the same care that Islahi takes to understand Joseph's dream is needed to understand the language of the Qur'an. Islahi himself says that the narrative about Joseph in this Surah is like a "mirror" (*aina*, *ibid*, p. 189), implying that it must be understood not as a presentation of fact but as a symbolic narrative that conveys a message or a lesson (*sabaq amuz . . . sar guzasht*, *ibid*).

It is also the case that Islahi does not always acknowledge the figurative meaning of a phrase. For instance, the irony in the attitude of Joseph's brothers when they plot to banish their brother and thereby to live as "righteous people" (verse 9) is missed altogether by Islahi. According to Islahi, the word *saleh* (righteous) should be taken in its literal meaning (*lafz 'saleh' yahan thik apne laghwi mafhum mein hai*, *ibid*, p. 196). Hence, their plot to banish Joseph will actually bring them relief from the burden their brother has been to them (*ye wo 'alaj hai jo hazrat yusuf ke bayon ne apni parishani dur karne ke liye socha*, *ibid*). But the irony that these brothers would, indeed, become "righteous people" by undergoing many trials leading to their subsequent conversion of heart is lost in Islahi's literalism.

Islahi's failure to appreciate irony is illustrated further when he discusses verse 93:

⁹³ According to Islahi, the same point is made in the first verse of Surah *Al Furgan*, which is the first Surah of Surah Group Four (cf. vol. 5, p. 443).

(And now) go and take this tunic of mine and lay it over my father's face, and he will recover his sight.

Instead of accepting this gesture as an example of Arabic custom,⁹⁴ Islahi says this was an emotional gesture on Joseph's part and that we cannot understand what was going on in his feelings (*in chizon ka ta'alluq jazbat se hai*, *ibid*, p. 251). Islahi says it is impossible to explain these things rationally (*'aql in ki taujih se bilkul qasir rah jati hai*, *ibid*, p. 252). But it is precisely Islahi's focus on a narrow concept of reason and rationality that prevents him from approaching these events and gestures from a different point of view. It is significant that the very last verse of the Surah refers to the "insight" needed to understand the stories of the Prophets:

Indeed, in the stories of these men, there is a lesson for those who are endowed with insight.

As one would expect, Islahi refers to these people of "insight" as "the people of reason" (*ahl 'aql*, *ibid*, p. 260), who act or think according to "reason" (*'aql se kam len*, *ibid*). But the style of the Surah, which Islahi had identified as the distinguishing mark of each Surah of this Surah Group, cannot simply be identified with the particular notion of rationality that Islahi has adopted. The style of the Surah is an expression of the social and literary customs of the period in which it was revealed and cannot be reduced to certain assumptions about "reason" and "rationality" prevalent in a subsequent age.

⁹⁴ Islahi has many references to Arabic custom in his discussion of this Surah. He refers to the common practices of the Quraysh (*is daur mein bardah quraysh ka rawaj 'am tha*, *ibid*, p. 200) and the "cushioned couch" referred to in verse 31 is explained in terms of the local customs (*misr ki is waqt ki tahzib ke mutabiq*, *ibid*, p. 208). He also explains slavery in terms of the customs of that period (*is zamane mein malikon ko apne ghulamon par jo ghair mahdud ikhtiyarat hasil they*, *ibid*, p. 217) and describes the jails according to the situation of the period (*is zamane ke jail*, *ibid*, p. 218). The prostration of Joseph's family is also explained in terms of the influence of the environment (*mahol se muta assir ho kar*, *ibid*, p. 254). Despite Islahi's frequent reference to Arabic customs and traditions, however, he does accept their significance in interpreting the Qur'an.

Conclusions

Islahi says that Surah *Yusuf* is another example of the general theme of Surah Group Three about the struggle between truth and falsity and the success and victory of the Muslims (*kamyabi o fatahmandi*, ibid, p. 183). He totally neglects the envy, jealousy and rivalry that form such an important part of this Surah. Besides, Surah *Yusuf* also deals with the theme of forgiveness and reconciliation. Islahi overlooks these aspects of the Surah because they do not fit easily into his pre-conceived notion of the theme (*'umud*).

Further, Islahi gives the Prophet Joseph's dream a religious meaning. He does not avert to the fact that the interpretation of dreams is a distinct branch of psychology. Perhaps this is another example of Islahi's failure to draw on the findings of modern social sciences in the interpretation of the Qur'an.

Islahi provides no evidence for his claim that many verses of this Surah were addressed to the Quraysh. Islahi does not simply say that some members of the Quraysh happened to be the first addressees of the Surah but that much of this Surah was actually addressed to the Quraysh (*ye sari sar guzasht quraysh ko sunai ja rahi hai*, ibid, p. 201). Islahi thereby fails to bring out the symbolic meaning of the story of Joseph and loses much of its universal significance.

Reading this Surah in the light of the theme he has already articulated (*is surah ke 'umud*, ibid, p. 250), Islahi concludes that the Surah describes the situation of darkness (*maujuda tarikion*, ibid, p. 245) in which the Prophet and his followers were living and the eventual victory of the Muslims in Mecca (*fatah makka*, ibid, p. 251). The ten categories of *haram* and *halal* presented by Islahi (cf. ibid, pp. 243-244) also reflect the subsequent victory in Mecca. The narrative of the Prophet Joseph is thus a mirror (*ek aina*) in which to understand the life and the times of the last Prophet (peace be upon him) who had to confront his own opponents, the Quraysh. By neglecting the occasions of revelation (*shan-i-nuzul*, vol. 1, p. 31), Islahi has failed to set the story narrated in this Surah against the wider background of the social questions and problems of the people. As a result, Islahi has been able to project his own version of the theme of the Surah onto the narrative.

Islahi finds evidence for his version of the theme of the Surah by presuming that people use reason in the same way in all place and circumstances (*'aql or fitrat, afaq o anfus ke dalail*, ibid, p. 183). He also claims that religion is based on nature (*fitri din*, ibid, p. 220) and on natural disposition (*nur-i-fitrat*, ibid, p. 207) linking all these assertions with his concept of “the way of God” (*sunnat-i-ilahi*). Islahi uses words like “human nature”, “reason” and “natural disposition” inter-changeably, assuming that their meaning is clear and claiming that they all explain his own particular notion of “the way of God”.

Islahi asserts that no external sign is needed to confirm the truth of the Qur'an (*is kitab ki sadaqat ki gawahi ke liye kisi kharaji mu'ajaze ya nishani ki zarurat nahin hai*, ibid, p. 188). However, by frequently highlighting the conquest of Mecca to confirm the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah, Islahi may have unwittingly provided a major historical event as a substitute for the external signs that the opponents of the Qur'an were demanding.

Finally, a note about Islahi's remark that the way the narrative of Joseph is presented in this Surah is more “natural” than the way it is presented in the Bible (*quran ka bayan bilkul natural hai aur taurat ka bayan bilkul khilaf-i-'aql o fitrat aur shan-i-nubuat ke munafi*, ibid, p. 190). Such a statement is a further indication that Islahi approaches the text with certain rational assumptions about what is “natural” and what is “reasonable”. Moreover, despite his frequent assertion that the main difference between Surahs consists in their different *styles of presentation* (*uslub-i-bayan aur najh-i-istadlal*), Islahi totally disregards the characteristic style of presentation used in the Biblical narrative. Islahi has not investigated the different styles of expression used in the former Scriptures (*qadim asmani sahife*, vol. 1, p. 33). This is an indication that he does not take the former Scriptures very seriously – despite his remark to the contrary in the Preface to his commentary.

Surah Ar R'ad

Introduction

This Surah is the twin of the previous one, Surah *Yusuf*. Islahi finds no substantial difference in theme ('*umud*) between the two Surahs. The Surah seeks to highlight the fact that one group is ultimately successful in the struggle between truth and falsity that was instigated by the revelation of the Qur'an (*anjamkar ki kamyabi is mein jis groh ko hasil hone wali thi is ko is mein numayan farmaya hai*, vol. 4, p. 263). The previous Surah also sought to clarify this reality (*haqiqat*, *ibid*) and each Surah has its own way of presenting it (*donon suraton mein tariq-i-istadlal alag alag hai*, *ibid*). Whereas Surah *Yusuf* expresses this reality through the life and experiences of the prophet Joseph (*zindagi ke halat o waq'e'at*, *ibid*), the present Surah depends on arguments drawn from reason and nature ('*aql o fitrat ke dalail*, *ibid*). Islahi says that the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah finds expression most clearly in verses 17-22, which end with the sentence:

It is these that shall find their fulfillment in the hereafter,
From this final sentence, however, it appears that the believers will obtain victory, prosperity and success in the *next* life, a promise apparently at variance with the theme of victory *in this world* that Islahi understands as the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah.

The Theme of the Surah

One of the main ways that Islahi arrives at his conclusion about the coherence of the present Surah is by proposing a general theme ('*umud*) for the whole Group and finding confirmation of this theme in several verses of the present Surah. Islahi expresses the general theme ('*umud*) of Group Three as follows:

A profound reflection on the Surahs of this Group will bring one to the evident conclusion that the truth common to all these Surahs, though expressed by them in different ways and from different angles, is the fact that the message of the Prophet is one of a struggle between truth and falsity. It is also quite clear from these Surahs that this struggle will result in a victory for the Prophet and for those who put

their faith in him and that, ultimately, the Quraysh will be subdued and humiliated.⁹⁵

Islahi proceeds to find verses that support this theme (*'umud*) by describing the nature of the victory hoped for by the Muslims and the expected defeat of their opponents. One of the key verses is verse 41:

Have, then, they (who deny the truth) never yet seen how We visit the earth (with Our punishment), gradually depriving it of all that is best thereon?

Islahi understands the reference to "the earth" in this verse as a reference to the region around Mecca (*al ard se murad yahan sar zamin makka hai*, ibid, p. 300). Islahi says that those looking for a sign to confirm the truth of the Prophet's message have only to look at what is happening around them. They will have to admit that, from all sides, Islam is slowly advancing on Mecca and they will have to conclude that Islam will soon be triumphant in the whole region (*islam ki da'wat biltadrij makka ke atraf ko fatah karti hui sar zamin makka ki taraf barh rahi hai*, ibid, p. 300).

Islahi proceeds to give a short history of early Islam. He says that, despite the opposition of the Quraysh, more and more people gradually embraced Islam (*ahista ahista atraf ke qabail ke bahot se log islam mein dakhil ho gaye*, ibid). Eventually, the migration to Medina took place (*bilakhir isi shahr ko allah ta'ala ne dar alhijrat hone ka sharaf 'ata farmaya*, ibid). In short, even though Islam remained oppressed in its own hometown, everywhere else Islam was becoming popular (*islam khud apne ghar mein to is daur mein mazlum raha lekin bahar is ko farogh hasil ho raha tha*, ibid). So it seems that, with regard to verse 41, Islahi has simply followed the interpretation of many commentators who say that the verse refers to the struggle between the early Muslim community and the pagans in Mecca.⁹⁶ However, by placing the verse in the context of the early history of Islam, Islahi can refer to it as a clear statement of the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah.

Islahi says that this particular understanding of verse 41 is confirmed in verse 44 of Surah *Al Anbiya*, which uses very similar words:

Nay, We have allowed these (sinners) – as (We allowed) their forebears – to enjoy the good things of life for a great length of time: but then – have they never yet seen how We visit the earth (with Our

⁹⁵ Cf. Ibid, p. 10. This statement of the overall theme of Surah Group Three has been taken from the general introduction at the beginning of Islahi's commentary on Surah Group Three.

⁹⁶ Muhammad Asad says that the view of these commentators would imply that the verse is "a prophecy of the gradual conquest of all Arabia by the Muslims". Asad (1980), p. 369, footnote 80.

punishment), gradually depriving it of all that is best thereon? Can they, then, (hope to) be the winners?

Islahi ends his discussion by providing more information about the history of early Islam, saying that the opponents of the Muslims were beginning to lose respect (cf. *ibid*, p. 301). For Islahi, the theme ('*umud*') of the present Surah has been firmly established in verse 41 and references to the theme in earlier verses of the Surah simply serve to confirm it.⁹⁷

The Social Context

Another way in which Islahi establishes the coherence of the Surah is by describing how the social context provides a background for the realization of the theme ('*umud*'). Since the Muslims were experiencing much opposition on the part of the Quraysh, Islahi finds many verses encouraging and consoling the Prophet. The very first verse can be understood in this light:

These are messages of revelation: and what has been bestowed upon thee from on high by thy Sustainer is the truth – yet most people will not believe (in it).

Islahi explains the verse as an expression of consolation (*tasalli*, *ibid*, p. 271) for the Prophet, who was facing much opposition. Similarly, verse 19:

Can, then, he who knows that whatever has been bestowed from on high upon thee by thy Sustainer is the truth be deemed equal to one who is blind? Only they who are endowed with insight keep this in mind.

Seen from one aspect, this verse consoles the Prophet (*tasalli ka pahl*, *ibid*, p. 284) and from another aspect, the verse is a warning for the unbelievers (*ibid*). Moreover, verse 31 contains some words of consolation for upright Muslims (*nek dil musalmanon ko tasalli di gayi hai*, *ibid*, p. 291). Islahi finds several other verses that express consolation for the Prophet in the difficult social conditions that he and his followers had to face.

Although verse 37 is addressed to the Prophet, Islahi says that there are some words in it directed to all the unbelievers (*is ka rukh tamam mushriqin ki taraf hai*, *ibid*, p. 297):

⁹⁷ In the group of verses 17-26, Islahi finds references to the eventual victory of truth and the defeat of falsity (*bilakhir haq ki fatah par muntahi hogi aur batil jhag ki manand ur jayega*, *ibid*, p. 280). Verse 17 alludes to the defeat of falsity and the permanence of the Qur'an (*ye sare jhag fana ho jayenge aur quran aur is ke hamalin baqi rah jayenge*, *ibid*, p. 283) and, in another place, Islahi states that the victory will come soon (*'anqarib in par wazeh ho jayega ke anjamkar ki kamyabi kis ko hasil hoti hai*, *ibid*, p. 297).

And, indeed, if thou shouldst defer to men's likes and dislikes after all the (divine) knowledge that has come unto thee, thou wouldst have none to protect thee from God, and none to shield thee (from Him).

Islahi says that verse 36 describes the People of the Book (*ahl kitab murad hai*, *ibid*, p. 296) and describes their disposition towards the revelation of the Qur'an (cf. *ibid*). Basing his views on the following sentence from the same verse:

But among the followers of other creeds there are such as deny the validity of some of it,

Islahi outlines the different attitudes of the Arabs and the Christians (*nisara aur mushriqin 'arab*, *ibid*), saying that the verse is a response to their difficulties and to their objections to the message of unity (*tauhid*, *ibid*).

Islahi exposes the political motivations of those referred to in the following sentence from verse 33:

Nay, goodly seems their false imagery to those who are bent on denying the truth, and so they are turned away from the (right) path: and he whom God lets go astray can never find any guide.

Islahi says that this sentence refers to those people who were ready to defend the worship of their deities (*shirk ki himayat mein*, *ibid*, p. 295). But it was only a ploy by which they tried to protect their power and status (*ye mahz apne iqtidar aur apni peshwai ko bachai rakhne ki ek chal hai*, *ibid*). The Prophet's message had deprived their religious practices of any real significance but they could not step down from their inherited positions of honour (*peshwai ki maurusi gaddi chauri nahin jati*, *ibid*). Islahi's perceptions into the psychological reasons for their behaviour provide new insights into the meaning of this verse. He exposes the psychological blocks that can prevent people from receiving guidance from God (*kis ki taqat hai ke in ko hidayat ki rah par la sake*, *ibid*).

Islahi explains several other verses by saying they represent answers to questions and objections made by the opponents of the Prophet. For example, some people were asking him about the resurrection of the dead (verse 5). Others were asking for a miraculous sign from on high (verse 7 and verse 27). Still others were demanding proof that the punishment would be real (verse 6). Islahi says that verses 12-13 are a response to the demand about punishment (*ab ye isi mutalba 'azab ke jawab hain*, *ibid*, p. 276). Moreover, Islahi says that two further answers are contained in verse 38:

And, truly, We sent forth apostles before thee, and We appointed for them wives and offspring; and it was not given to any apostle to produce a miracle save at God's behest.

Islahi says that this verse provides a clear answer to two main objections of the unbelievers. The answers consist in the fact that firstly, the messengers were not angels but human beings and that, secondly, the messengers could work a miracle only with the permission of God (cf. *ibid*, p. 299).

A final point that requires our attention is the way Islahi discusses the "natural bond" that all men and women have with God ('*ahd allah*). There is a reference to this "natural bond" in verse 20:

They who are true to their bond with God and never break their covenant.

Islahi says the covenant refers to the natural covenant (*misaqi fitrat*, *ibid*, p. 285) that all human beings have made with God through Adam (*misaq se murad yahan misaq fitrat hai jo tamam aulad adam se kiya gaya hai*, *ibid*). A further reference to the "bond with God" is to be found in verse 25:

As for those who break their bond with God after it has been established (in their nature).

Islahi says that here the verse refers to the natural bond with God ('*ahd fitrat*', *ibid*, p. 287). However, when the same phrase appears in verse 91 of Surah *An Nahl*:

And be true to your bond with God whenever you bind yourselves by a pledge,

Islahi says it refers to the covenant that the Jews made with God (*yahud ko mukhatab kar liya hai . . . in ki taraf rukh kar ke farmaya ke allah se jo 'ahd tum ne bandha hai is ko pura karo*, *ibid*, p. 441). Although the wording of this verse from Surah *An Nahl* does not differ from the two verses in Surah *Ar R'ad*, Islahi views this verse in the light of the preceding verses (*qarina*) that refer to the Jews.

Different Kinds of Language

For Islahi, the language of the Surah provides further indication of the overall theme and connectedness of the Surah. For instance, Islahi notes the teasing style in verse 33:

Do you (really think that you could) inform Him of anything on earth that He does not know – or (do you) but play with words?

He says that God uses this style to expose the unbelievers' wrong conception of God (*mushriqin se bandaz tanz sawal farmaya hai*, *ibid*, p. 295). Other

messages are conveyed through the parables, which Islahi says are meant to invite people to reflect. For example, the parables in verse 17 point to what will happen to those who are on the side of falsity and to what is in store for the believers (*tamsilen is liye pesh kar raha hai ke in ke andar wo log bhi apna mustaqbil dekh len jo batil ki hamayat mein astinin charhaye hue hain aur ahl iman bhi apna roshan mustaqbil dekh len*, *ibid*, p. 283). Since Islahi's approach is to apply the parables to specific groups of people, he says the parables in verse 17 concern unbelievers as well as those who believe. This approach is consistent with the approach he takes for verse 92 of Surah *An Nahl* and for verses 175-176 of Surah *Al A'raf* where he applies the parable explicitly to the Jews (cf. *ibid*, p. 443).

Islahi says that certain words from verse 16 are used in a figurative way:

Can the blind and the seeing be deemed equal? – or can the depths of darkness and the light be deemed equal?

Islahi says that the words '*ama* (blind) and '*basir* (seeing) in this phrase stand for rational and ethical blindness and vision ('*aqli o akhlaqi andhon aur binaon ke mafhum mein ist'emal hue hain*, *ibid*, p. 279). Similarly, *zulumat* (darkness) stands for rational and ethical darkness ('*aqli aur akhlaqi tarikiyan*, *ibid*) and *nur* (light) stands for the light of reason or the light that comes from faith ('*aqli o imani roshni*, *ibid*). Islahi has a similar figurative way of understanding verse 19:

Can, then, he who knows that whatever has been bestowed from on high upon thee by thy Sustainer is the truth be deemed equal to one who is blind?

Islahi says the verse describes intellectual and spiritual blindness ('*aql o dil ke andhon ke liye warid hua hai*, *ibid*, p. 284). In other words, Islahi is willing to accept that these verses make use of language in a figurative or metaphorical way.

On the other hand, Islahi implies that the illustration (*misal*) in verse 35 is an accurate description of paradise. He does not make any further investigation into the figurative meaning of this image (*wo aise sada bahar baghon mein utare jayenge jin ki paidawar bhi daimi aur jin ka saya bhi daimi*, *ibid*, p. 295). Islahi has a literal approach to this verse.

The Way of God

Islahi continues to develop the overall theme of the Surah by using the concept “the way of God” (*sunnat ilahi*). As verse 7 says:

Thou art only a warner; and (in God) all people have a guide.

God sends a messenger to warn the people before bringing punishment down on those who stubbornly refuse his message (*ye is sunnat ilahi ki taraf isharah hai ke allah ta'ala kisi qaum ko saza dene se pahle is ko inzar o tanbih farmata hai*, *ibid*, p. 274). Similarly, Islahi says that the phrase in verse 8:

for with Him everything is (created) in accordance with its scope and purpose,
is another example of “the way of God” (*sunnat ilahi*) that cannot be altered by human impatience (*logo ki jald bazi se wo sunnat ilahi mutaghayyar nahin hoti*, *ibid*).

Moreover, Islahi finds the theme of the Surah expressed in verse 11:

Verily, God does not change men's condition unless they change their inner selves; and when God wills people to suffer evil (in consequence of their own evil deeds), there is none who could avert it: for they have none who could protect them from Him.

Islahi explains that, according to “the way of God” (*sunnat ilahi*) God brings punishment to a nation only if the people refuse to accept the warning given to them (*ye qaumon ke 'azab ke ma'amle mein sunnat ilahi ki wazahat farma di*, *ibid*, p. 275). Islahi says that, in this verse, “the way of God” (*sunnat ilahi*) urges a person to take stock of his life (*is sunnat ilahi ki roshni mein apne halat ka jaizah lo*, *ibid*). If a nation evaluates and changes its behaviour, God will swiftly change the way God deals with this nation (*khuda ka tumhare sath jo ma'amla ab tak raha hai ab is ke badalne mein bhi der nahin hai*, *ibid*). But once God decides to punish a nation, no one can prevent this from happening, least of all the nation's deities (*cf. ibid*). In other words, Islahi places this verse in the context of the warnings regarding the fate of a nation that are part his concept of “the way of God” (*sunnat ilahi*).

According to Islahi, verse 16 says that it is against reason to suggest that truth and falsity are the same (*'aql o insaf ke khilaf hai*, *ibid*, p. 283). Islahi broadens the concept of “the way of God” (*sunnat ilahi*) by saying that, according to verse 17, it is also against human nature and against the way God maintains the universe (*sunnat ilahi*) to suggest that truth and falsity are

the same (*fitrat ke bhi khilaf hai aur is sunnat ilahi ke bhi jo is kainat mein jari o nafiz hai*, *ibid*). Islahi says that the parables contained in this verse carry the same message, affirming that the clash between truth and falsity will result in the complete victory of the truth (*cf. ibid*). It seems that Islahi is using the concept of “the way of God” (*sunnat ilahi*) to provide further confirmation of the theme (*‘umud*) of the Surah about the triumph of the truth. Moreover, for Islahi, the triumph of the truth is given a specific, visible expression in the triumph of Islam in Mecca, as we saw in the section above on the theme of the Surah.

Verse 34 is a further example of the concept of “the way of God” (*sunnat ilahi*):

For such, there is suffering in the life of this world; but, truly, (their) suffering in the life to come will be harder still, and they will have none to shield them from God.

Islahi says the verse refers to the punishment (*‘azab*) that God inflicts on a nation after the messenger of God has accomplished his mission to present the people with complete and convincing arguments (*is sunnat ilahi ko yad rakhe . . . ke jis qaum par rasul ke zara'e se hujjat tamam kar di jati hai agar wo iman nahin lati to lazman wo halak kar di jati hai*, *ibid*, p. 295). It seems that Islahi is focusing here on the final destruction of the unbelievers rather than on the suffering they experience in the present world.⁹⁸ But it seems that this reference to final destruction is also taken as an illustration of the triumph of truth over falsity and of the victory of the Muslims over the Quraysh.

Islahi finds further verses to illustrate this concept of “the way of God”. For example, the phrase from verse 37: “God lets go astray him who wills (to go astray)”, is a reminder that God guides those who seek the truth through the abundant evidence available to them (*afaq o anfus ki nishaniyon ko dekh kar haqiqat ke talib bante hain*, *ibid*, p. 289). Furthermore, the phrase from verse 31: “God alone has the power to decide what shall be”, states that victory and defeat take place according to “the way of God” (*hidayat o zalalat ke bab mein us ki jo sunnat hai wo isi ke mutabiq in ke sath ma'amla karega*, *ibid*, p. 291). Again, Islahi seems to be hinting at the future victory of the Muslims in Mecca.

⁹⁸ In Surah *An Nahl*, Islahi makes a distinction between two kinds of punishment, the first of which consists of the calamities and suffering people experience in this world, which is meant to stir them into action and to reform their lives, and the second kind of punishment comes only in the next world.

Conclusions

Islahi begins by saying that the present Surah is the twin of the previous one, Surah *Yusuf*. However, I find these two Surahs very different in their subject matter and I fail to see how they could form a pair on the basis of their theme ('*umud*). The only way these Surahs could have the same theme is by approaching them with a certain pre-conceived notion of their subject matter and understanding all other aspects in this particular light.

Islahi says that this Surah sets out to present the theme ('*umud*) of victory for the Muslims and defeat for the Quraysh. Islahi finds a reference to the imminent victory of the Muslims in several verses throughout the Surah, especially in the reference to "the earth" in verse 41 (*al ard se murad yahan sar zamin makka hai*, *ibid*, p. 300). Islahi has predisposed the reader to understand this victory in a physical, material sense.

Islahi understands this Surah as describing the slow but steady spread of Islam (*islam khud apne ghar mein to is daur mein mazlum raha lekin bahar is ko farogh hasil ho raha tha*, *ibid*, p. 300). Islahi usually describes the history of religion (*din*) as a phenomenon of the past according to the historical narratives in the Qur'an. However, in the present Surah and in Surah *An Nur*, he explains *din* in the light of the subsequent history of Islam. Moreover, in the present Surah, he accepts the traditional interpretation of verse 41, about the imminent victory of the Muslims, because it conforms to the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah Group.⁹⁹

For Islahi, the meaning of a verse emerges from its socio-political and cultural background. Hence, he views many verses in the light of the consolation and encouragement (*tasalli*) the Prophet received during his ordeal with the Quraysh (*is roshni mein*). He says that some verses refer to the political and psychological motivation of various groups of people living at the time of revelation. Furthermore, Islahi accuses one group of protecting its own power and status and another group of being concerned with its own prestige (*apne iqtidar aur apni peshwai ko bachai rakhne ki ek chal hai*, *ibid*, p. 295). Islahi's observations are plausible but he cannot claim that these are the only implications that the Surah is making.

⁹⁹ Islahi finds confirmation of this interpretation of the verse in verse 41 of Surah *Al Anbiya*, cf. *ibid*, p. 301.

Islahi acknowledges the symbolic use of certain expressions in the Surah. He finds words that stand for rational and ethical blindness and vision (*'aqli or akhlaqi andhon aur binaon ke mafhum mein ist'emal hue hain*, ibid, p. 279). Moreover, verse 19 describes intellectual and spiritual blindness (*'aql o dil ke andhon ke liye warid hua hai*, ibid, p. 284). Other verses are taken in a literal or physical sense. For example, Islahi describes the garden of paradise as if it were part of our human experience. Islahi is reluctant to investigate the symbolic or metaphorical sense of these expressions.

Finally, Islahi uses the concept of "the way of God" (*sunnat-i-ilahi*) for his own purpose, which is to clarify the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah regarding the triumph of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the defeat and humiliation of his enemies.

Surah Ibrahim

Introduction

In the introduction to Surah *Ibrahim*, Islahi refers back to verse 41 of Surah *Ar R'ad*, which he had interpreted as indicating the approaching victory of the Muslims over Mecca. Islahi says that Surah *Ibrahim* throws further light on this situation, showing how God provided prosperity for the Muslims while the Quraysh experienced loss and failure. Hence, the present Surah illustrates the basic theme ('*umud*) of Surah Group Three by saying that God will strengthen the believers in this world and grant them victory in the next world as well, provided that they show patience in adversity and remain firm in their profession of the truth while facing all the obstacles on their path with complete trust in God (*allah ta'ala ahl iman ko dunya mein bhi mazbut o mustahkam karega aur akhirat mein bhi in ko sur khurui bakhshenga basharateke wo sabar o istiqamat ke sath apni da'wat haq par jame rahe aur is rah mein pesh ane wali azmaishon ka unhone allah par barosah karte hue maqablah kiya*, vol. 4, p. 305).

Islahi says that the account of the experience of the Prophet Moses in the previous Surah has already confirmed this basic truth. Now, in Surah *Ibrahim*, the reason for the Prophet Abraham's migration to the area of Mecca and his subsequent experience there is presented as a kind of mirror in which the Quraysh could understand their own situation (*ye baten sunane se maqsud quraysh ke samne in ki apni tarikh ka aina rakh dena hai ta ke wo andazah kar saken ke in ko kiya banana tha aur wo kiya ban ke rah gaye hain*, *ibid*). In other words, Islahi views the Surah as giving further clarification and definition to the basic theme ('*umud*) of the Surah Group by stipulating that the Muslims will be victorious and the Quraysh will experience defeat.

The Social Context

Islahi achieves greater clarity regarding the theme ('*umud*) by reflecting on the *language* and the *context* of the Surah. For instance, he says that, despite the general tone of the language, the Surah is directed specifically to the Muslims (*khitab agarche 'am hai lekin rue sakhan musalmanon hi ki taraf hai*, *ibid*, p. 312). Moreover, the *context* indicates that the addressees are the Quraysh (*siyaq o sabaq dalil hai ke mauqa' izhar ta'jjub aur malamati ka aur isharah quraysh aur un ke lidaron ki taraf hai*, *ibid*, p. 328).

Furthermore, even though verses 42-43 are obviously addressed to the Prophet, the reprimand contained in these verses is directed to the Quraysh (*ayat mein khitab zahir alfaz ke e'tibar se to peghambar salla allahu alayhi wa sallam se hai lekin is mein jo shadid 'atab hai wo tamam tar quraysh par hai*, *ibid*, p. 337). Islahi makes precisely the same remark about verse 47 (*is ka rukh kuffar o mushrikin ki taraf hai*, *ibid*, p. 338). Similarly, Islahi says that the frequent references to punishment are directed to the Quraysh. Although he makes a passing remark about the way such punishment affects the individual himself (*insan khuda ke haq ko bhi talaf karta hai aur khud apne nafs ke haq ko bhi*, *ibid*, p. 330) his primary focus is on the Quraysh as a group.

Islahi places verses 5-8 in the context of the difficulties the Muslims were having with the Jews, who were siding with the Quraysh against Islam (*yahud ko mutanabbah karna tha jo islam ki mukhalafat ke josh mein apna sara wazan quraysh ke palre mein dal rahe they*, *ibid*, p. 309). Islahi says the word for “your Sustainer” (*rabbukum*) shows that verse 7 was addressed to the Jews (*cf. ibid*, p. 312). Just as the Quraysh had abandoned the teaching of the Prophet Abraham, so the Jews had turned a deaf ear to the warnings of the Prophet Moses (*cf. ibid*, pp. 309-310). Likewise, as the Israelites passed through many difficulties before achieving their freedom, in a similar way the Muslims will have to undergo many trials before tasting victory (*azmaishen bahut pesh ati hain . . . lekin akhir kar kamyabi ahl iman hi ko hasil hoti hai*, *ibid*, p. 312). Moreover, Islahi applies lessons derived from the historical narratives concerning the Prophet Moses to the experiences of the Muslims at the time of revelation. For instance, Islahi says that verse 6 is a warning to the Israelites not to oppose Islam in the way they had already rejected Moses (*islam ke mukhalafat*, *ibid*, p. 311). Islahi thus understands these verses against the background of the socio-political realities of the Muslim community at the time of revelation.

Islahi says that the historical period in which verses 13-14 were revealed is evident from the text of the verses themselves (*in ayat se is surah ke zamana nuzul par bhi roshni parti hai*, *ibid*, p. 317):

But they who denied the truth spoke (thus) unto their apostles: “We shall most certainly expel you from our land, unless you return forthwith to our ways!”

Whereupon their Sustainer revealed this to His apostles: “Most certainly shall We destroy these evildoers, and most certainly shall We cause you to dwell on earth (long) after they have passed away:

this is (My promise) unto all who stand in awe of My presence, and stand in awe of My warning!”

These verses form part of the historical narrative of the Prophets that lived before the last Prophet. But Islahi sees in these same verses a reference to the socio-political context of the nascent Muslim community in Mecca. He says that the verses point to the decision of the Muslims to migrate because of the extremely difficult situation the Quraysh were creating for the Muslims (*ye baten da'wat ke is daur mein farmai gayi hain jab quraysh ne apne zulm o satm se aise halat paida kar diye hain ke . . . hijrat ke siwa koi aur rah baqi nahin rah gayi hai*, *ibid*). Islahi says that the verses themselves highlight this context.

A further example of the way Islahi discovers the context in the verses of the Surah is the specific connotation he gives to the reference to “God’s blessings” in verse 28:

Art thou not aware of those who have preferred a denial of the truth to God’s blessings?

Islahi says these blessings are a reference to the peaceful life in the towns at the time of revelation (*shahri zindagi ka sakun*, *ibid*, p. 328) as well as to the fertile, agricultural land from which the Quraysh were able to gain sustenance (*ek wadi ghair zi zar' mein rizq o fazal ke darwaze khole*, *ibid*). Islahi’s interpretation is influenced by the overall theme of victory for the Muslims in the region of Mecca (*sar zamin makka mein*, *ibid*, p. 332), which he had posited as the main idea (*'umud*) of the Surah. Hence he stresses that Abraham prayed for a suitable *location* as a basis for his descendants (*markaz qaim kar saken*, *ibid*, p.330) and his prayer was answered, for the Quraysh had become the leaders, not only of the *khana k'aba*, but of the whole region around it (*quraysh ko khana ka'ba ki pasbani ki badaulat sare mulk mein amamat o siyadat ka darja hasil ho gaya*, *ibid*, p. 332). As a result of Abraham’s prayer, the region around the *khana ka'ba* soon became known as the center of Arabia (cf. *ibid*) and Mecca became the center for trade in the region (*makka tamam 'arab ki tajarat ka markaz ban gaya*, *ibid*, p. 334). Islahi also highlights the function of the *khana ka'ba* as a place for prayer (*khana ka'ba asl mein namaz ka markas hai*, *ibid*, p. 333). Consequently, Islahi can argue that the Quraysh do not have any further claim over the *khana ka'ba* because they have disregarded its main function (*tauhid aur namaz sab kuch zaiy' kar baite*, *ibid*).

Islahi says that the coherence of the Surah is shown by the many references to the theme (*'umud*) concerning the eventual victory of the Muslims over

the Quraysh (*quraysh . . ka thakana jahanam hai. us ke ba'd musalmanon ko kamyabi ki basharat hai*, *ibid*, p. 326). For example, Islahi says that a phrase from verse 30 refers to this same 'umud:

Say: "Enjoy yourselves (in this world), but, verily, the fire will be your journey's end!"

Islahi repeats that the Quraysh had been blessed by God in so many ways and had been charged with custodianship of the holy places (*khuda ne in ko haram ki pasbani ki badaulat tamam 'arab ki siyadat o qayadat bakhshi*, *ibid*, p. 328). Since the Quraysh have forfeited their trust, the verse is an allusion to the fact that they would soon be defeated (*cf. ibid*) for God will provide a safe place for the believers (*jo log tauhid par qaim hain allah ta'ala in ko dunya aur akhirat donon mein rusukh qadam aur tamakan bakhshenga*, *ibid*, p. 323).

The language and the context of verse 31 also contain an allusion to the coming victory of the Muslims over their opponents (*musalmanon ke lie mustaqbil ki kamyabi ki basharat bhi muzamar hai*, *ibid*, p. 329). The verse is a call to the Muslims (*ye pegham musalmanon ke liye hai*, *ibid*):

(And) tell (those of) My servants who have attained to faith that they should be constant in prayer and spend (in Our way), secretly and openly, out of what We provide for them as sustenance.

Islahi says the verse presents the Muslims with the opportunity to take charge of the holy places, which have been violated by the Quraysh (*ab ahl iman ke liye ye mauqa' hai ke wo in maqasid ke liye apne ap ko taiyar karen aur is amanat ke amin banen*, *ibid*).

It is interesting to note how Islahi finds the same specific context in the personal pronoun in verse 34, which addresses *mankind* as such (*ye khitab insan se bahaisiyat insan hai*, *ibid*, p. 330):

And (always) does He give you something out of what you may be asking of Him; and should you try to count God's blessings, you could never compute them.

(And yet,) behold, man is indeed most persistent in wrongdoing, stubbornly ingrate!

Islahi says that, despite the general connotation, the message is meant specifically for the unbelievers (*lafz insan agar che 'am hai lekin rue sakhan inhi mushrikin ki taraf hai jin ka zikr upar ki ayat mein guzra*, *ibid*). Islahi says that the verse seems to be a general reference because it is not appropriate to address the unbelievers directly (*cf. ibid*). However, the verse is a specific reference to the social context at the time of revelation. It is

noteworthy that Islahi passes over another general word for “mankind” (*anas*) that is used in verse 1:

A divine writ (is this – a revelation) which We have bestowed upon thee from on high in order that thou might bring forth all mankind, by their Sustainer’s leave, out of the depths of darkness into the light.

It is clear that Islahi’s aim is to highlight the specific context of the Muslims and the Quraysh. Hence, he interprets the Surah in this light (*is roshni mein*).

Different Kinds of Language

Islahi understands the language that is employed to describe the punishment given to unbelievers in a *prima facie* way. For example, verses 15-17 say:

And (thus it is:) every arrogant enemy of the truth shall be undone (in the life to come), with hell awaiting him; and he shall be made to drink of the water of most bitter distress, gulping it (unceasingly,) little by little, and yet hardly able to swallow it. And death will beset him from every quarter – but he shall not die: for (yet more) severe suffering lies ahead of him.

Islahi paraphrases these verses in his own words without further comment, except to say that their punishment on earth will be continued in hell (cf. *ibid*, p. 318). But it would seem that the style of the language in these verses about hell could be understood as a severe warning rather than as a description of what will actually take place there. As verse 18 makes clear, the style throughout this passage is a parable (*ye in mushrikin ke ‘amal ki tamsil hai*, *ibid*, p. 320). Instead of investigating the language of the parable, Islahi accepts the language in its *prima facie* meaning.

For Islahi, a rational approach is one that expresses the content of the verses according to a logical progression of concepts. This is clear from the way Islahi understands the parables in terms of rational, logical arguments (*upar ki ayat mein shirkiya o kufriya ‘amal ki tamsil bayan hui. ab age ki ayat mein shirkiya ‘aqaid o nazriyat aur tauhid aur is par mabni ‘aqaid o nazriyat ki tamsil bayan ho rahi hai*, *ibid*, p. 323). Consistent with his view of a parable as simply a means to express doctrines and arguments, Islahi provides three “truths” that are contained in the parable on God’s unity (*tauhid ke tamsil*, *ibid*, p. 325). Moreover, he says that the “parable of a corrupt word” in verse 26 (*kalima shirk ki tamsil*, *ibid*) is an expression of the fact that *shirk* has neither natural nor rational foundation (*shirk ki koi buniyad na ‘aql o fitrat ke andar hai*, *ibid*, p. 326).

Islahi gives another example of his rational approach in his comment on verses 19-20:

Art thou not aware that God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with (an inner) truth? He can, if He so wills, do away with you and bring forth a new mankind (in your stead): nor is this difficult for God.

He says the verse is addressed to the Quraysh (*ye wazeh alfaaz mein quraysh ko dhamki hai*, *ibid*, p. 321) reminding them that their behavior has contradicted the purpose of their creation by God (*ye dunya kisi khilandarey ka khel tamasha nahin hai balke allah ne is ko ghaiyat o maqsud ke sath paida kiya hai aur tumhara wujud is ghaiyat o maqsud ke bilkul khilaf ho kar rah gaya hai*, *ibid*). Since Allah is both merciful and just, it would be easy (and reasonable) for him to destroy these people who have committed so many injustices (*in logon ko fana kar dena is par kiyun gran guzrega*, *ibid*, p. 321). Islahi implies that people who reject the unity of God go against their own reason (*tauhid ki bunyad 'aql o fitrat mein bhi hai*, *ibid*, p. 323).

The same *prima facie* approach to language is displayed in Islahi's description of the conversation between the weak and "those who had gloried in their arrogance" (verse 21) as well as in the conversation between the devil and those who followed him (verse 22). Islahi fails to comment on the style or nature of the language, focusing solely on the *content* of the conversations related in these verses (cf. *ibid*, pp. 321-322). Yet Islahi does refer to a specific style of language (*balaghat zaban ka ye ek uslub hai*, *ibid*, p. 332) used by Abraham with respect to the idols in verse 36:

for, verily, O my Sustainer, these (false objects of worship) have led many people astray!

However, he does not analyze the concept of "idols" (*buton*, *ibid*, p. 332), leaving the reader with the impression that these were false objects of worship in the narrow sense of the word (*quraysh ne in tamam ni'maton ko apne dewaton ke khat mein dal dia hai*, *ibid*, p. 330).¹⁰⁰ Similarly, the

¹⁰⁰ Muhammad Asad presents a broader understanding of these idols. He writes:

"The term 'idols' (*asnam*, sing. *sanam*) does not apply exclusively to actual, concrete representations of false 'deities': for *shirk* – that is, an attribution of divine powers or qualities to anyone or anything beside God – may consist also, as Razi points out, in a worshipful devotion to all manner of 'causative agencies and outward means to an end' – an obvious allusion to wealth, power, luck, people's favour or disfavour, and so forth – 'whereas genuine faith in the oneness and uniqueness of God (*at tauhid al mahd*) consists in divesting oneself of all inner attachment to (such) causative agencies and in being convinced that there exists no real directing power apart from God' ". Asad (1980), p. 378, footnote 50.

correct meaning of the word for “clothed” (*sarabil*) in verse 50 must be “clothes” because of the context (*yahan mauqa' kalam dalil hai*, *ibid*, p. 339). The context (*mauqa' kalam*) viewed in this way supports the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah.

Conclusions

Islahi states that the Surah is directed to the Muslims and to the leaders of the Quraysh. He draws this conclusion on the basis of the context (*siyaq o sabaq dalil hai*, ibid, p. 328) and by referring to the direction of the speech (*is ka rukh kuffar o mushrikin ki taraf hai*, p. 338).¹⁰¹ According to Islahi, it is not appropriate for the Qur'an to address the unbelievers directly (cf. ibid, p. 330). He offers no justification for this view.

Moreover, the historical period in which verses 13-14 were revealed is evident from the text of the verses themselves (*in ayat se is surah ke zamana nuzul par bhi roshni parti hai*, ibid, p. 317). Islahi discovers the conditions in which the Muslims were living from the text itself (*is daur mein . . . quraysh ne apne zulm o sitm se aise halat paida kar diye hain*, ibid). Furthermore, Islahi allows the theme ('*umud*) to indicate that the meaning of "God's blessings" (*ni'mah*) in verse 28 is actually a reference to the region around Mecca (*sar zamin makka mein*, ibid, p. 332). The text suggests the context and the context leads to the theme and back again to the text – according to the method of the hermeneutical circle.

Islahi outlines the history of *din* from a socio-political point of view according to which Abraham's prayer was a prayer for a suitable *location*. As a result, the region around the *khana ka'ba* soon became known as the center of Arabia and Mecca became the center for trade in the region (*makka tamam 'arab ki tajarat ka markaz ban gaya*, ibid, p. 334). Since the Quraysh forfeited their right to be the custodians of the *khana ka'ba*, they would soon be defeated and the Muslims would be victorious (*musalmanon ko kamyabi ki basharat hai*, ibid, p. 326).

Islahi's rational approach to the parables enables him to summarize them in clear concepts. By presenting the three "truths" contained in the parable on God's unity in verses 21-22, he shows that the parable provides a foundation for the main theme ('*umud*) of the Surah. However, instead of investigating the style of the language used in these verses, Islahi becomes preoccupied with the *content* of the conversations related in verses 21-22 and draws conclusions based on his own logical way of thinking. As a result, despite a passing reference to a specific style of language (*balaghat zaban ka ye ek*

¹⁰¹ The phrase *rue sakhan* also expresses the direction of speech (*lafz insan agarche 'am hai lekin rue sakhan inhi mushrikin ki taraf hai jin ka zikr upar ki ayat mein guzra*, ibid, p. 330).

uslub hai, ibid, p. 332), Islahi's analysis is limited to a discussion of idols (*buton*) and the nature of hell using language that is physical or material. In contrast, Islahi investigates the two possible meanings of the word for "clothed" (*sarabil*) in verse 50 and decides on the correct meaning of the word from the context (*yahan mauqa' kalam dalil hai*, ibid, p. 339) because it best supports the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah. Islahi thus makes the Surah coherent by supplying his own content for the language and the style of the Surah.

Surah Al Hijr

Introduction

The rejection of the message of the Qur'an by the Quraysh is the reality that dominates Islahi's commentary on this Surah. Islahi describes the way God threatens the Quraysh with punishment in this world and in the hereafter while repeatedly encouraging the Prophet in view of the rejection he experiences.

Whereas the previous Surah had already expressed the contrast between the threat of punishment for the unbelievers and the constant encouragement and consolation (*tasalli*, vol. 4, p. 343) for the Prophet and his followers, the same contrast is described in much more detail in Surah Al Hijr (*pichhli surah ke akhir mein kuffar ke liye jo tahdid o wa'id aur an hazrat salla allahu alayhi o sallam ke liye jo taskin o tasalli mujmal alfaz mein warid hui hai wo is surah mein bilkul samne a gayi hai*, *ibid*). The Prophet is reminded that the logic of the Qur'an presents the argument in a clear way (*ye quran bajae khud ek wazeh hujjat hai*, *ibid*). Hence, the Prophet should not be overly concerned with the fact that people ridicule and reject his message as nonsense. Previous Prophets had to endure a similar fate. Even miracles would not help to dismiss their doubts. The Prophet is advised to ignore these people for the time will come when they will be thinking, "if only we had accepted the message of the Prophet and the Qur'an and become Muslims" (*mumin o muslim bane hote*, *ibid*).

The Coherent Universe

The title Islahi gives to his commentary (*tadabbur-i-quran*) indicates the place that rational reflection has in his methodology. Islahi stresses the need for reflection (*tadabbur*) to emphasize the believers' own responsibility to observe the signs (*nishaniyan*) provided by God in nature and to draw the logical conclusion about the need for accountability on the Last Day. Similarly, unbelievers will have no excuse for protest on the Day of Reckoning because they are constantly being invited to use their senses and their reason. The word for "truth" (*haq*) in verse 8:

We never send down angels otherwise than in accordance with the (demands) of truth,
is understood by Islahi to refer to a human being's ability to decide for himself (*haq ke ma'ni yahan faislah ke hain*, *ibid*, p. 348). He says that God

wishes all human beings to use their reason (*allah ta'ala ye chahta hai ke log apni 'aql aur samajh se kam len aur afaq o anfus mein jo nishaniyan maujud hain . . . in par ghaur kare*, ibid). According to Islahi, it will be obvious to those who use their reason that the harmony and coherence of the universe demand a Day of Reckoning. The theme ('*umud*) of Surah Group Three is based on the observation of harmony and order in the universe and the implication that a day of reckoning will bring victory to the Muslims and defeat to the Quraysh.

Islahi develops his notion regarding the coherence of the Qur'anic text (*nazm kalam*, ibid, p. 352) by reflecting on the harmony and coherence apparent in the universe. Verses 16-25 express and confirm the message of the Prophet by drawing attention to the signs in the universe (*in nishaniyon ke taraf tawajah dalai gai hai*, p. 349). The limitations of modern science make it impossible to predict the outcome of the break-up of constellations (*sains ke bas se bahar hai*, ibid). Yet to anyone with an open mind (*jin ke andar sochne samajhne ki salahiyat maujud hai*, ibid), the universe provides abundant evidence that the world is not just the result of a game or of an accident (*ye kisi khilandarey ka khel aur kisi ittifaqi hadsa ke taur par zahur mein ajane wali chiz nahin hai*, ibid) but the creation of a wise and powerful Creator who has not simply left the world to its own devices. The coming Day of Reckoning is, for Islahi, the logical conclusion to these observations (*ye lazim hai ke wo ek aisa din bhi laye jis mein wo sab ko ikatha kar ke in ke 'amal nek o bad ka hisab kare aur in ke 'amal ke mutabiq in ko jaza ya saza de*, ibid).

In further support of his notion of coherence, Islahi stresses the impossibility for the Creator to have abandoned his creation. For if the Creator were to do this, the world would disintegrate and human civilization would disappear (*wo agar kisi chiz ko bhi . . . chaur deta hai to is zamin ka sara nazam darham barham ho ke rah jata aur insanon ke bajae is mein koi aur hi makhluk abad hoti ya ye bilkul ghair abad ho ke rah jati*, ibid, p. 353). For Islahi, verses 20-21 point to the way God has provided a well-ordered system (*nazam rabubiyyat*, ibid) whose balance and proportion is so evident (*is tuwazin o tanasub ki taraf isharah hai jo khaliq kainat ke tamam kamon mein maujud hai*, ibid). The continuing existence of the world demands that everything remains in balance (*har chiz ek tanasub ke sath zahur mein aye*, ibid) and cannot be the result of an accident (*na to kisi ittifaqi hadsa ke taur par zahur mein a gayi hain*, ibid) as the unbelievers claim. Islahi's emphasis on the signs of a structured and well-ordered universe (*ye khuda hi ka*

intizam aur isi ki rahmat hai ke us ne tumhare liye ye intizam kar rakha hai, ibid, p. 354) leads him to the conclusion regarding the day of accountability. As verse 25 says:

And, behold, it is thy Sustainer who will gather them all together (on Judgment Day); verily, He is wise, all-knowing!”

Islahi understands this verse to be the logical conclusion of this sequence of verses (*is ke hakim hone ka taqaza hai ke wo ek roz jaza o saza laye*, ibid). The point that Islahi wants to make is that the Qur'an is a coherent witness to the reality of a coherent universe.

Islahi refers explicitly to the concept of coherence to explain the “seven gates” leading into hell, mentioned in verse 44. From the point of view of coherence (*nazm kalam ke pahlu se*), hell needs to be large enough to cater for a large number of unbelievers (*khuda ne aisi mujrimon ko saza देने ke liye bari wazih jahanam taiyar kar rakhi hai*, ibid, p. 361). According to Islahi, there is a logical connection between the extent of hell and coherence (*nazm kalam*) in the fact that many unbelievers may have to be punished on the Day of Reckoning, in keeping with the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah Group. In other words, it is consistent that the Surah mentions the capacity of hell since it has constantly been warning the unbelievers of their coming fate. In contrast, verses 45-48 are a suitable ending to this group of verses because they describe what is in store for the believers (*ab ye in logon ka injam bayan ho raha hai jo khuda se darne wale aur is ke ahkam par 'amal karne wale hain*, ibid, p. 362).

Islahi provides a lengthy explanation of the phrase from verse 87: “seven of the oft-repeated (verses)”, saying that it refers to the pairing of the Surahs (*quran ki tamam suraten jora jora hain*, ibid, p. 377) and to the seven groups of Surahs to be found in the Qur'an (*quran goya sat abwab par mushtamal hai*, ibid, p. 378).¹⁰² Islahi alludes to the themes (*mazamin*) of the various Surahs and Surah Groups (*in abwab aur in faslon mein mazamin mushtarak bhi hain*, ibid) and says that each Surah and Surah Group has its own point of view that distinguishes it from the others (*ek khas imtiaz pahlu bhi hai jo in ko ek dusre se mumayyaz karta hai*, ibid).

¹⁰² A more common view among scholars is that verse 87: “seven of the oft-repeated (verses)” is a reference to the seven verses of Surah *Al-Fatihah*.

The Social Context

Verse 9 shows that the Qur'an was revealed at a time of hardship for the Prophet:

Behold, it is We Ourselves who have bestowed from on high, step by step, this reminder: and, behold, it is We who shall truly guard it (from all corruption).

Islahi says that these are words of consolation for the Prophet (*ye peghambar salla allahu alayhi wa sallam ko nihayat parzor alfaz mein taskin o tasalli di gayi hai*, ibid, p. 348). So that God's consolation might have a greater impact on the Prophet, verses 10-13 describe the way all the Prophets were rejected by their people but consoled by God (*taskin o tasalli ke mazmun ko mazid muakkad*, ibid, p. 349). Interpreting the verses as consolation and encouragement for the Prophet gives further strength to the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah Group, namely, the eventual victory of the Prophet and his disciples and the downfall of their opponents.

Verses 26-48 give the original *purpose* for the account of creation (*quran ka maqsud asli*, ibid, p. 357). He says that the purpose of this account is not to describe the creation of human beings but to express the abiding hostility between human beings and *iblis* (*is ki aur adam ki zuriyyat mein ek mustaqil wajah 'anad o hasad bani*, ibid) and to explain the nature of the opposition that the Prophet had to face. Islahi says that those who rejected the Prophets cannot claim that there were insufficient arguments to substantiate the message of the Prophets (*rasulon ki baton ki sadaqat sabit karne ke liye dalilen maujud nahin hain*, ibid, p. 354) or that no miracles were forthcoming. Islahi highlights the freedom of choice contained in verses 41-42:

Said He: 'This is, with Me, a straight way': verily, thou shalt have no power over My creatures – unless it be such as are (already) lost in grievous error and follow thee (of their own will)

As a result, Islahi argues that these people have only themselves to blame (*sirf shamat zadah hi honge jo is sidhi rah ko chaur kar koi kaj pich wali rah ikhtiyar karenge*, ibid, p. 360). The fact that a group of people remained faithful to God (*khuda ke mukhlas bande*, ibid, p. 354) proves that *iblis* has power only over those human beings that choose to follow him (*jo teri perwi karna chahenge aur gumrahi ko pasand karenge*, ibid).

Similarly, Islahi describes the context of revelation by highlighting the *purpose* for the arrival of the Prophet Abraham's guests. Islahi identifies verses 49-79 as a separate group of verses revealed for the special purpose of warning the Quraysh that their desire to have angels come as messengers would result in making the same demands on them as it did on the house of Lot (*is sarguzasht ko sunane se maqsud quraysh ko agah karna hai ke agar farishton ko dekhne ka arman rakhte ho to is injam se duchar hone ke liye bhi taiyar raho jo qaum lot ka hua*, *ibid*, p. 362). Consequently, verse 49, the first verse of the group, deals with the incorrect impression that God would treat believers and unbelievers alike (*nek aur bad donon is ki nazar mein yaksan hain*, *ibid*, p. 365). On the contrary, in keeping with the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah, the believers will be successful (*bilakhir wohi log kamyab o hamurad hote hain*) and, after God has provided them with sufficient arguments (*hujjat tamam*), the unbelievers will be punished (*bilakhir in ko in ke is inharaf ki saza mil ke rahti hai*, *ibid*).

The rest of the story related in this group of verses deals primarily with the theme of the punishment in store for the unbelievers (*itmam hujjat ke ba'd 'azab-i-ilahi ka faislah*, *ibid*, p. 369) and the nature of the punishment that was meted out to Lot's people (*is 'azab ki nau'iyat*, *ibid*, p. 370).¹⁰³ These verses were meant for the Quraysh (*kuffar quraysh*) whose daily journeys brought them in close proximity to the ruins left by the destruction of Lot's people (*aye din in ko guzarna parta hai*, *ibid*, p. 371). Islahi's conclusion once again confirms the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah, namely, reward for the virtuous and punishment for the evildoers (*ahl-i-haq ko agar che imtehanat pesh ate hain lekin bilakhir wohi khuda ki rahmat ke sazarar taharte hain aur in ke dushman pamal ho ke rahte hain*, *ibid*). The last Prophet is encouraged to hold firm to the message he was asked to deliver by remaining certain of the fact that the present generation of Quraysh will experience the same fate as earlier peoples did if they persist in their rebellious attitudes, though the Prophet and his disciples will be rewarded (*anjamkar ki kamyabi tumhara aur tumhare sathion hi ka hisah hai*, *ibid*, p. 372). Islahi actually describes the natural disasters that occurred to these people (*zulm ki padash mein qudrat ki taraf se in ke liye zahir hota hai*, *ibid*, p. 374), after all the arguments to persuade them to believe in the Prophets' messages had been clearly presented (*itmam-i-hujjat ke ba'd*, *ibid*). Moreover, explicit mention is made of the people of *Al Hijr* in verse 80 (as

¹⁰³ Islahi refers to the people of Lot as "unbelievers". However, it would be more correct to say that they were punished for their immorality. Islahi fails to clarify that nations were punished for their injustice, immorality and evildoing rather than for their unbelief.

other names had been mentioned earlier) because the Quraysh were familiar with all these people (cf. *ibid*). In other words, this description of the natural disasters that came to unbelievers in past times is directed to the Quraysh at the time of revelation.

Conclusions

The argument of the Surah, according to Islahi, is that there are abundant signs (*nishaniyan*) in this well-ordered universe pointing to the need for final accountability. Islahi concludes that the Surah is a coherent statement of this logical necessity. Since it is obvious for those who use their reason (*'aql aur samajh*) that the harmony and coherence of the universe point to a Day of Reckoning, the Qur'an must also be coherent because it is an expression of the same message. Islahi has used an argument based on logical necessity to argue for the coherence of the Qur'an.

Islahi views the entire context of this Surah in the light of (*is roshni mein*) the opposition and oppression that the Quraysh were bringing against the Muslims. Hence, the reference to the extent of hell in verse 44 is logically demanded by the possibility of numerous people being consigned to hell as a result of their life on earth. Similarly, the Prophet Abraham's guests are a warning for the Quraysh and the verses describing the punishment that was meted out to Lot's people are meant for the Quraysh. Likewise, mention is made of the people of *Al Hijr* for the sake of the Quraysh because they were familiar with these people. The argument for the coherence of the Surah depends for its plausibility on the way the Surah has been understood as a rational argument in response to the struggle between the Muslims and the Quraysh. The theory of the coherence of the Qur'an is intimately connected with this specific period of history.

In the course of presenting this argument, Islahi draws a sharp line of division separating two parties, exposing them as two groups in open conflict with each other in the way that good is opposed to bad (*nek aur bad*, *ibid*, p. 365). Islahi describes the first group as God's virtuous people (*khuda ke mukhlas bande*, *ibid*, p. 354) and as those who are truthful (*ahl-i-haq*, *ibid*, p. 371). He sets up an opposition between the believers (*mumin o muslim*, *ibid*, p. 343) and the unbelievers (*kuffar quraysh*, *ibid*, p. 371), who are like criminals worthy of punishment (*khuda ne aisi mujrimon ko saza dene ke liye*, *ibid*, p. 361). Islahi sets up this radical opposition in order to highlight the motif of victory for the Muslims and defeat for the Quraysh as it is expressed in the theme (*'umud*). One is left with the impression that Islahi is trying to prove the correctness of his own version of the theme of the Surah.

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Islahi discovers this radical opposition in other Surahs in this Surah Group as well. For instance, the distinction between men (*admi*) and animals (*janwar*) is made by Islahi in his comment on Surah *An Nahl* to describe those who are of sound mind (*jo log apni 'aql ki qadar karte*, ibid, p. 429) and who use their reason (*'aql se kam le*, ibid, p. 397) as compared with those who do not. The latter cannot see the evidence in the universe pointing to the existence of a Creator who will demand accountability on the Last Day. Such are the insane people who have made deities out of the rivers and the oceans (*nadanon ne*, ibid). In short, the believers are considered completely preserved from all contamination (*bilkul mahfuz ho jayen*, ibid, p. 450). They are quite distinct from the Quraysh who spread corruption (*ashrar o mufsidin*, ibid, p. 533) according to verse 83 of Surah *Al Isra*.

Moreover, in Surah *Maryam*, Islahi views society in terms of a polarization between “people immersed in the world” (*dunya ke paristar*, ibid, 681) and “believing people” (*bandah mumin*, ibid). He divides society into the oppressors (*zalimon*, ibid, p. 679) and the God-fearing people (*ahl taqwa*, and *ahl haq*, ibid). Islahi also refers to “the stupidity of the unbelievers” (*mushrikin 'arab ki hamaqat*, ibid, p. 675) and to “foolish people” (*bewaquf logon*, ibid). It seems to me Islahi’s portrayal of this fundamental dichotomy among people in the world has been necessitated by his desire to demonstrate the thematic coherence of the Surah.

Surah An Nahl

Introduction

Islahi begins by referring to the general discussion at the beginning of Surah Group Three in which he said that the struggle between truth and falsity instigated by the appearance of the last Prophet would definitely end in victory (*fatah*) for the Prophet and for his followers while resulting in defeat (*hazimat*) for those who oppose him (*wo lazman rasul aur is par iman lane walon ki fatah aur is ke jhutlane walon ki hazimat par khatm hoti hai*, vol. 4, p. 383). On the basis of selected verses from the Surahs belonging to Group Three, Islahi argues that the general theme (*'umud*) of Group Three is the triumph of the believers and the humiliating defeat in store for their opponents.

Now, in Surah *An Nahl*, the same theme is brought out by means of a new style (*ye haqiqat ek neyi uslub se is surah mein bhi wazeh ki gayi hai*, *ibid*). According to Islahi, verse 30 expresses the theme (*'umud*) of this Surah regarding the success (*farozmandi*, *ibid*) of the believers:

Good fortune awaits, in this world, all who persevere in doing good; but their ultimate state will be far better still: for, how excellent indeed will be the state of the God-conscious (in the life to come)!

A further expression of the theme (*'umud*) is to be found in verse 41 of the Surah:

Now as for those who forsake the domain of evil in the cause of God, after having suffered wrong (on account of their faith) – We shall most certainly grant them a station of good fortune in this world, but their reward in the life to come will be far greater yet.

Islahi says that these verses promise the believer a certain power and authority, even in this world (*ham in ko dunya mein bhi iqtidar o tamkan 'ata karte hain*, *ibid*). The previous Surah ended with a word of consolation (*tasalli*, *ibid*) for the Prophet, who was being harassed by those who scoffed at his message. Acting as a link with the previous Surah, the first verse of Surah *An Nahl* tells these same people (*in mutakbarin hi ko khitab kar ke*) that they cannot assume their idols will be able to save them from God's action (*wo in ko khuda ki pakr se bacha lenge*, *ibid*). As verse 1 says:

God's judgment is (bound to) come: do not, therefore, call for its speedy advent!

The Theme of the Surah

One of the ways Islahi argues for the coherence of the Qur'an is to show how the theme ('*umud*) of the whole Surah Group finds expression in each Surah of the Group. We have seen how Islahi finds the same theme ('*umud*) expressed in verse 30 of the present Surah. Islahi says that success and prosperity will come to the believers in this world (*in ke liye dunya mein bhi bhalai aur kamyabi hai*, *ibid*, p. 405). Islahi stresses that the verse promises success in this world (*sarih al-faz mein is dunya mein bhi kamyabi o nusrat ki basharat hai*, *ibid*), meaning victory for the Prophet and his followers (*rasul aur is ke sathiyon ke liye is dunya mein bhi ghalba aur iqtidar lazmi hai*, *ibid*).

Furthermore, verse 41 deals with the same theme. Islahi says that the verse refers to those who were persecuted on account of their religion and were forced to leave their own houses to settle elsewhere (cf. *ibid*, p. 411). The verse is a promise that they will be strong and powerful even in this world (*dunya mein bhi in ko achhi tarah mutamakkin karega*, *ibid*). Since Islahi had already alluded to verse 41 in his analysis of verse 30, it is clear that he considers the two verses to be thematically linked.

Islahi finds another clear statement of this theme ('*umud*) in verse 128:

For, verily, God is with those who are conscious of Him and are doers of good withal.

Islahi says that this last verse of the Surah expresses the help that was promised to the Muslims and the eventual victory of Islam (*ye nusrat ka wa'dah aur balakhir islam aur musalmanon ke ghalba ki basharat hai*, *ibid*, p. 465). Since God is with the righteous, they must ultimately, be victorious (*lazman anjamkar ki kamyabi bhi inhi ka hissah hai*, *ibid*).

However, a similar phrase from verse 97, which could, therefore, also be understood in line with the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah, was not included in this discussion by Islahi. Verse 97 says:

As for anyone – be it man or woman – who does righteous deeds, and is a believer withal, him shall We most certainly cause to live a good life; and most certainly shall We grant unto such as these their reward in accordance with the best that they ever did.

Instead of linking this verse with the theme of the Surah, Islahi launches out into a discussion of the trials men and women must undergo, stating that the trials of women must be heavier than those of men (*in ka imtehan kamzaur 'ansar hone ke sabab se mardon ke imtehan se bhi ziyadah sakht tha*, *ibid*, p.

448). The reason for this discussion seems to be that Islahi chose to focus on the phrase “be it man or woman” rather than on another phrase from the verse, namely, the “good life” that was promised to all believers.

From this short overview of Islahi’s discussion of the relevant verses, it is clear that he tends to understand the success and prosperity of the Muslims and of Islam at the time of revelation in a physical, material way, which is in line with the way he understands the theme (*‘umud*) of the entire Surah Group. Furthermore, he has highlighted those verses of the present Surah that most fitted his understanding of its theme (*‘umud*).

The Appeal to Reason

Another way in which Islahi tries to establish the coherence of the Qur’an is to stress the way the argument of the Surah is built on reason. He concludes that, since the message of the Surah is intelligible and reasonable, the theme of the whole Surah must be coherent. Islahi draws this conclusion from verses like verse 3, which says:

He has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with (an inner) truth.

Islahi asserts that this verse points logically to the need for accountability on the Last Day. Without accountability on the Last Day, the whole of creation becomes a meaningless game (*agar aisa na ho to ye tamam karkhana bilkul ‘abas aur beghayat ek khel ban ke rah jata hai*, *ibid*, p. 390). Islahi finds a cross-reference to the same idea in verse 115 of Surah *Al Muminun*:

Did you, then, think that We created you in mere idle play?

In fact, the same idea is mentioned in other Surahs of this Surah Group as well. In short, the work of the Creator has a purpose and the logical outcome of this purpose is the day of reckoning (*is ke baghayat o bamaqsud hone ka lazmi taqaza hai ke is ke ba’d ek aisa din laye jis mein in logon par an’am farmaye*, *ibid*, p.396). Verse 12 says:

And He has made the night and the day and the sun and the moon subservient (to His laws, so that they be of use) to you; and all the stars are subservient to His command: in this, behold, there are messages indeed for people who use their reason!

Islahi comments that the Creator of this universe could not allow the world to continue without arranging for some means of accountability (*wo is ko ghair masul aur mutlaq al’inan nahin chorega*, *ibid*).

Islahi says that, unless a human being uses his or her reason (*'aql se kam le*, ibid, p. 397) to draw profit from all the evidence in the universe, he or she is no more than a brute beast (*to wo sare se admi hi nahin hai balke nira wo tangon par chalne wala ek janwar hai*, ibid). Indeed, Islahi says that those who do not use their reason in this way are insane people who have made deities out of the rivers and oceans (*nadanon ne in daryaon aur samundaron hi ko dewi dewata bana kar in ki puja aur 'ibadat sharu' kar di*, ibid). Islahi repeats that the worship of such deities is insanity (*mahz nadani hai*, ibid, p. 399). The Book has been revealed to bring guidance to our minds (*roshni aur 'aql ke liye rahnumai hai*, ibid, p. 413). The main point is that Islahi brings all the marvels of the universe into a thematic harmony by saying that any person with a sound mind can draw the same rational conclusions (*jo log apni 'aql ki qadar karte*, ibid, p. 429). For a “reasonable person” (*ma'qul insan*, ibid), all these verses point to a single conclusion and so they all support the impression that the verses are thematically inter-connected.

The Social Context

Islahi gives the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah further definition by claiming that certain verses refer to either the Quraysh or to the Muslims. For example, he identifies the Quraysh as the addressees of verse 4, which refers to mankind in general:

He creates man out of a (mere) drop of sperm: and lo! this same being shows himself endowed with the power to think and to argue!

Islahi says that the word for “man” (*insan*) is a reference to those unbelievers who were alluded to in the first verse (*insan se yahan murad wohi kuffar o mushrikin hain jo upar ki ayat mein mukhatab hain*, ibid, p. 390) thereby taking a general word for mankind (*insan*) and giving it a very specific designation. However, as Islahi himself says, the Qur'an seeks to bring awareness to people in general (*quran dar haqiqat insan ki isi salahiyat ko baidar karna chahta hai*, ibid, p. 397).

Islahi makes another specific identification of the addressee when he says that verse 24 describes the motivation of the leaders of the people. He says that this verse describes the way people who heard the Qur'an were consulting their leaders for advice about how to respond to its message:

and (who), whenever they are asked, “What is it that your Sustainer has bestowed from on high?” – are wont to answer, “Fables of ancient times!”

This verse describes how the great interest shown by many people in the Qur'an was taken by the leaders of society as a threat to their position (*lidaron ne ye mahsus kar ke ke in ke pairon se muta'assir ho rahe hain aur ye chiz in ki lidari ke liye khatre ka ba'is ho sakti hai*, ibid, p. 402). In response, these leaders answered the people by saying that they were preserving the traditions of the ancestors (*ham apne abao ajdad ke sahih din par hain*, ibid). Similarly, verse 26 reflects the same concern of the leaders of the people to preserve their authority (*apni lidari ke tahaffuz ke liye*, ibid, p. 403). Islahi says that the Quraysh had similar problems with the rising popularity of the Prophet (*quraysh ke lidar an hazrat sall'am ke mukhalafat kar rahe they*, ibid, p. 403) and explains that verse 38 refers to the Quraysh (*quraysh ke mutakbarin*, ibid, p. 411). Verse 88 is also a reference to the Quraysh (*quraysh ke in ashraf*, ibid, p. 441). It is clear that Islahi has no difficulty with connecting these verses to the actual situation of conflict that existed between the Prophet and his opponents, the Quraysh.

The focus shifts to the Jews as the social context for verses 91-95. Islahi hints at a political alliance between the Jews and the Quraysh (*unhone quraysh ke in lidaron ki pit tunkni sharu' kar di thi*, ibid, p. 439). Moreover, Islahi accuses the Jews in no uncertain terms of opposing Islam itself (*ye yahud ki in mufsidanah koshishon ki taraf ishara hai jo wo islam ki taraf mail logon ko islam se rukhne ya islam qabul kar lene walon ko mutazilzil karne ke liye saraf kar rahe they*, ibid, p. 442). Islahi even applies the parable in verse 92 directly to them (*in yahud hi ko mukhatab kar ke*, ibid, p. 442).¹⁰⁴ The basis for Islahi's concern with the Jews is his identification of the "bond with God" (*'ahd allah*), mentioned in verse 91, with the covenant that the Jews had made with God (*allah se jo 'ahad tum ne bandha hai*, ibid, p. 441). However, since there is no mention of any special covenant with God in the preceding or subsequent verses, the "bond with God" mentioned in verse 91 should be understood as something rooted in human nature as such.¹⁰⁵ There seems to be insufficient evidence for understanding these verses solely in the context of Jewish opposition to the Prophet, as Islahi does.

¹⁰⁴ The parable of the woman spinning yarn in verse 92 is a reference to an Arabic custom and has no connection with the Jews.

¹⁰⁵ Similarly, verse 25 of Surah *Ar R'ad* establishes the bond with God in human nature:

But as for those who break their bond with God after it has been established (in their nature), and cut asunder what God has bidden to be joined, and spread corruption on earth – their due is rejection (by God), and theirs is a most evil fate (in the life to come).

There is no mention of a *covenant* with God either in connection with this verse or in connection with the verses immediately preceding or coming immediately after this one.

Islahi says that the following verses (96-105) are a response to the objections the Jews were raising about the Qur'an (*in e'tirazat ke jawab ki jo yahud ne quran ke khilaf utae they*, ibid, p. 448), especially with regard to the question of abrogation, which is the topic of verses 101-103. Islahi asserts that the Jews and the Quraysh were making these objections (*ye bat kahi to yahud ne lekin ye besamjhe bauje quraysh ke in lidaron ne bhi duhrane sharu' kar di*, ibid, p. 449). Islahi simply makes these assertions without providing any evidence to support these allegations against the Jews and the Quraysh.

On the other hand, Islahi says that verses 106-111 are addressed to the Muslims in order to strengthen them in facing the opposition they were experiencing (*in ko khitab kar ke*, ibid, p. 452). Earlier verses, such as verse 37, were also meant to console the Muslims (*tasalli*, ibid, p. 410). Moreover, Islahi describes the social context of the people of Mecca and mentions their social customs as a background to the concepts *haram* and *halal* (cf. ibid. p. 459-460). Islahi also says that verse 126 pertains to the specific period in which the Muslims were subject to the ridicule of their opponents (*is daur se muta'alliq hai jab musalman afrad ki surat mein apne mukhalafon ke andar gire hue*, ibid, p. 464):

Hence, if you have to respond to an attack (in argument), respond only to the extent of the attack leveled against you; but to bear yourselves with patience is indeed far better for (you, since God is with) those who are patient in adversity.

The situation changed, however, when the Muslims obtained political power (*ek ba qa'idah munazam islami hukumat ke hadud kar aur is ke ikhtiyarat is se mukhtalif hain*, ibid). Islahi's remarks only reinforce the impression that the context he describes is that which prevailed during the time of revelation.

Different Kinds of Language

Islahi goes so far as to explicitly deny the metaphorical sense of some verses in order to emphasize that the punishment, which came to unbelieving nations in the past, actually happened to them. Verse 26 says:

Those who lived before them did, too, devise many a blasphemy – whereupon God visited with destruction all that they had ever built, (striking) at its very foundations, so that the roof fell in upon them from above, and suffering befell them without their having perceived whence it came.

Islahi makes the point that destruction, in the form of earthquakes and floods, actually happened to these unbelieving peoples (*ma'zab qaumen zilzilon aur bad-i-tund o sailab ke aise taufanon se halak huen jin se in ke makanon ki diwaren aur chaten sab in ke upar a paren*, *ibid*, p. 403). Islahi goes on to say that to interpret these events metaphorically would be tantamount to saying that they never occurred (*ye mahz ista'rah nahin balke bayan waqe' hai*, *ibid*). But it seems to me that to give these events a metaphorical meaning is not the same as to say that these natural disasters never really occurred.

Significantly, there are other verses in this Surah for which Islahi does seem to accept a metaphorical interpretation. For example, the plural word for “gates of hell” in verse 29 is an indication of the extent of hell, thereby hinting at the *figurative* meaning of this word (*lafz abwab jam' hai jis se jahanam ki wusa't ki taraf bhi isharah ho raha hai*, *ibid*, p. 405). Similarly, Islahi says that the phrase “(gardens) through which running waters flow” in verse 31 is an expression of the beauty of the garden (*ek achhe bagh ka tasawwur*, *ibid*), thus hinting at the *figurative* sense of this phrase. On the other hand, he says that the verb “they enter” (*yadkhulun*), from the same verse, is used in its actual sense (*apne haqiqi aur kamil ma'ni mein hai*, *ibid*) as if to imply that this “actual sense” rules out a figurative sense. Having said this, Islahi proceeds to understand the same verb “they enter” in a metaphorical way, saying that the word points to everything that the believers in heaven could desire to have (*cf. ibid*).

In a similar way, Islahi argues that the word “listen” in verse 65 is used in its “actual sense” (*yahan apne haqiqi ma'ni mein hai*, *ibid*, p. 427). But the meaning could not be restricted to a physical sense of the verb “to listen” since Islahi himself says that it is a question of understanding and accepting the message (*is ko samajhte aur is ko qabul karte hain*, *ibid*), which is a metaphorical sense of the word “to listen”. In addition, to determine the meaning of a word, one must take the cultural environment of the period into account (*jaisa ke 'amuman zamana qadim mein rawwaj raha hai*, *ibid*, p. 444). Islahi gives the example of the word “barter”, which does not have the everyday meaning of “to buy” in verse 95 but which has a different meaning in this verse (*cf. ibid*).

Furthermore, Islahi gives a physical, material sense to the words describing those who forsake the domain of evil in the cause of God (*hajaru fi'llah*). Verse 41 reads:

Now as for those who forsake the domain of evil in the cause of God, after having suffered wrong (on account of their faith) – We shall most certainly grant them a station of good fortune in this world: but their reward in the life to come will be far greater yet.

Islahi says that the verse describes the true meaning of migration for one's beliefs (*hijrat ki haqiqat bhi wazeh hoti hai*, ibid, p. 412), saying that it describes a person who is forced to leave his or her beloved native land to go elsewhere (*apna mahbub watan . . . chaur kar wahan se nikalne aur dusri sar zamin ko apni panah gah banane par majbur ho jaye*, ibid). This is undoubtedly one of the meanings that the term *hijrah* has acquired in the subsequent history of Islam but there is no evidence in the text of the Surah that would require the term to be restricted to a physical, material understanding. Islahi has a similar explanation for verse 110, even identifying Abyssinia as the place to which the believers migrated (*hijrat se yahan isharah hijrat habashah ki taraf hai*, ibid, 455).

One is left with the impression that Islahi understands the word *hijrah* according to the understanding he has inherited from the history of Islam. If this is the case with the concept *hajaru fi'llah*, it may be that Islahi's reading of the history of Islam has also influenced other important concepts in his commentary. Why, for instance, does Islahi usually render the phrase *amr allah* as the "punishment of God" (*allah ka 'azab*, ibid, p. 388) instead of the "judgment of God" (*'azab ke liye amr ilahi sadir ho chuka hai*, ibid)? The words "judgment of God (*amr allah*) occur both in verse 1 and in verse 33:

God's judgment is (bound to) come: do not, therefore, call for its speedy advent!

Are they (who deny the truth) but waiting for the angels to appear unto them or for God's judgment to become manifest?

Islahi explains these verses by saying that the punishment of God has come and has destroyed these people (*in par 'azab ilahi adhamka aur us ne in ko tabah kar ke rakh dia*, ibid, p. 409).

It is possible that Islahi's intent to find further illustrations of the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah regarding victory for the believers and defeat of the unbelievers has prompted him to stress the final punishment or destruction of those who reject the message of the Prophets. This would explain why Islahi consistently translates the phrase *amr allah* as the "punishment of

God” rather than as the “judgment of God”?¹⁰⁶ However, this disregards the victory of the believers *in this world*, which Islahi has given great emphasis and whose fulfillment Islahi sees in the conquest of Mecca by the Muslims.

Again, the concept of *shirk*, which Islahi usually links with the worship of deities has, in some contexts, the wider meaning of oppression or even immorality, as Islahi himself admits (*quran ne jaga jaga kufr o shirk ko zulm se ta'bir kiya hai*, *ibid*, p. 420). Hence, with regard to verse 85:

And when they who are bent on evildoing behold the suffering (that awaits them),

Islahi says that the phrase refers to those who committed *shirk* (*yahan murad wo log hain jinhone shirk kar ke*, *ibid*, p. 437), but the verse is an expression of *shirk* in the narrow sense (*wo dewi dewata . . . unhone khuda ka sharik banaya tha*, *ibid*). The narrow interpretation is an indication of Islahi's effort to confirm the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah.

Islahi recognizes the simile contained in the parable of the bee given in verses 68-69 as simply an image to convey a general message about wisdom (*isi tarah ye log apne tadabbur o tafakkur ki kawishon se hikmat ka shahad jam' karte hain*, *ibid*, p. 429). In contrast, the parable in verse 92 is applied specifically to the Jews:

Hence, be not like her who breaks and completely untwists the yarn which she (herself) has spun and made strong – (be not like this by) using your oaths as a means of deceiving one another, simply because some of you may be more powerful than others.

Islahi says the old woman depicted in this parable is an image of the Jews, as already presented by means of the parable of the dog in Surah *Al A'raf* (*jis tarah yahan yahud ki misal ek burhaya se di hai isi tarah in ki misal a'raf 175-176 mein ek aise shakhs se di hai*, *ibid*, p. 443). Islahi establishes the link between the meaning of the two parables through the pronoun “who” (*allazi*), which they both use, but adds that these parables do not refer to actual persons, only to the general situation (*is se maqsud mahz taswir-i-hal hai na ke kisi mata'in shakhs ki taraf isharah*, *ibid*). The conclusion seems

¹⁰⁶ We find a similar stress on God's punishment (*'azab ilahi*) in Islahi's comment on verse 31 of Surah *Ar R'ad*. With reference to the phrase from that verse: “sudden calamities will always befall them or will alight close to their homes; (and this will continue) until God's promise (of resurrection) is fulfilled”, Islahi says that God's punishment will wipe out those who reject the message of the Prophets (*agar us ne rasul ki bat na mani to bilakhir is par 'azab ilahi ayega jo is ko ek qalam fana kar dega*, *ibid*, p. 292). Islahi also mentions the other purpose of such calamities, which is to bring awareness (*ghafilon ke andar baidari paida hota*, *ibid*). His stress, however, is clearly on the final destruction of the unbelievers.

to be that the pronoun *who* is a precarious link by which to apply both these parables to actual Jewish people, as Islahi does.

Finally, Islahi offers his own understanding of abrogation, which, he says, will facilitate the reader's grasp of the coherence of the Surah (*nazm kalam ke samajhne mein*, *ibid*, p. 450). However, it is likely that Islahi's understanding of these verses has been influenced by his own presuppositions and inclinations. In verse 102, we read:

Say: "Holy inspiration has brought it down from thy Sustainer by stages, setting forth the truth, so that it might give firmness unto those who have attained to faith.

It is not clear what factors have led Islahi to understand the words *ruh al quddus* as a reference to the angel Gabriel and the word for "truth" (*haq*) as describing the kind of religion (*din*) that is unadulterated or pure (*haq se murad wo khalis aur be amiz din hai*, *ibid*, p. 450). He says that the believers are completely preserved from all contamination (*bilkul mahfuz ho jayen*, *ibid*) and explains the stages of revelation as necessary for the development of faith (*cf. ibid*). These observations are not rooted in the text of the Qur'an.

The Way of God

Islahi employs the concept "the way of God" (*sunnat ilahi*, *ibid*, p. 388) right from the beginning of the Surah as a way of moving beyond the specific context of the verses. According to this concept, God sends every nation a messenger who brings complete and convincing arguments by which each nation can make a judgment between right and wrong (*rasul, haq o batil ke imtiyaz ke liye kasuti aur itmam hujjat ka akhri zara'e hota hai*, *ibid*, p. 389) and either attain salvation or be destroyed. Once the Prophet has presented his message in a clear and complete fashion, no excuse remains for any nation to claim leniency before God (*itmam hujjat ke ba'd . . . koi 'azar baqi na rahega*, *ibid*, p. 434). Islahi uses this concept to explain the more universal meaning of several other verses of the Surah, for example, verse 84 (*cf. ibid*, p. 436) and verse 89 (*cf. ibid*, p. 438).

Islahi finds another example of "the way of God" (*sunnat ilahi ke taraf ishara hai*, *ibid*, p. 454) in verse 108:

They whose hearts and whose hearing and whose sight God has sealed
– it is they, they who are heedless!

Islahi says that he has already explained this concept of “the sealing of hearts” in verse 7 of *Al Baqara*. It is not God who “seals” hearts but it is the person’s own response to God that seals the heart. As the phrase from verse 33 of the present Surah says:

It was not God who wronged them, but it was they who had wronged themselves.

Islahi notes this dimension of God’s way (*khuda ne in par koi zulm nahin kiya*, *ibid*, p. 409) but does not explicitly include this point in his concept of “the way of God” (*sunnat ilahi*). Yet this aspect of God’s way has significant consequences for a correct understanding of God’s dealings with mankind.

Conclusions

According to Islahi, this Surah continues to elaborate on the theme ('*umud*) of Surah Group Three by describing the imminent victory of the Muslims *in this world* (*dunya mein bhi bhalai aur kamyabi hai*, *ibid*, p. 405). Islahi understands certain key verses like verse 30, verse 41, and verse 128 as indicating that this victory (*ghalba*) will be a physical or material one. However, by far the majority of scholars are of the opinion that no Meccan Surah refers to the victory of the Muslims. Moreover, the reference in verse 41 to people being forced to leave their homes is a reference to past peoples and not to the migration of the Muslims from Mecca to Medina. Islahi interprets verse 41 in the light of an event (*hijrah*) that will happen much later in history. The Surah is not an expression of consolation (*tasalli*) for the Prophet (peace be upon him) as Islahi claims.

Islahi appeals to reason to provide the basis for his argument that the Surah is coherent. As we saw in previous Surahs, Islahi finds the necessity for final accountability to be a logical conclusion that emerges from reflection on the harmony and coherence evident in the universe. He argues that this well-structured system could not allow human beings to play games in the world like children who are not held to account for their pastimes (*agar aisa na ho to ye tamam karkhana bilkul 'abas aur be ghayat ek khel ban ke rah jata hai*, *ibid*, p. 390). In short, Islahi says that any person who uses his reason ('*aql se kam le*, *ibid*, p. 397) will recognize the logical necessity for final accountability. Islahi does not relate the concept of final accountability with faith.

Islahi understands the Surah to be making a sharp distinction between the Muslims and the Quraysh.¹⁰⁷ According to Islahi, the Surah divides humanity into two groups: the believers (*mumin*) and the unbelievers (*kuffar o mushrikin*, *ibid*, p. 390). He gives a specific designation to the general word for man (*insan*) in verse 4, making the word refer to either one of these two groups. However, the Qur'an is addressed to *all* human beings and not specifically to the groups that Islahi mentions.

Islahi says that the parables of this Surah do not refer to actual persons, only to the general situation (*is se maqsud mahz taswir-i-hal hai na ke kisi mata'in shakhs ki taraf isharah*, *ibid*, p. 443). Despite this assertion,

¹⁰⁷ I have referred to this point in my conclusion to the discussion of Surah *Al Hijr*.

however, he says that the parable in verse 92 is directed specifically to the Jews. Islahi's argument for this conclusion rests on his understanding of the pronoun "who" (*allazi*). Moreover, verses 96-105 are a response to the objections the Jews were making about the Qur'an and verses 106-111 are addressed to the Muslims who were being oppressed by their opponents. Islahi says that verse 126 pertains to the specific period (*is daur se*) when the Quraysh was harassing the Muslims. In short, Islahi understands all these verses in the light of (*is roshni mein*) the opposition between the Muslims and the Jews, who were plotting against them together with the Quraysh. One could argue, however, that there is no reference at all to the Jews in the whole of the present Surah. The Jews began plotting against the Muslims much later, after the battle of *Badr* and not at the time this Surah was revealed.

Islahi seems to allow a figurative meaning for "gates of hell" in verse 29 (*lafz abwab jam' hai jis se jahanam ki wusa't ki taraf bhi isharah ho raha hai*, *ibid*, p. 405). Similarly, the reference to gardens "through which running waters flow" in verse 31 is an expression of the beauty of the garden (*ek achhe bagh ka tawawwur*, *ibid*). On the other hand, he says that the verb "they enter" (*yadkhulun*), from the same verse, is used in its actual sense (*apne haqiqi aur kamil ma'ni mein hai*, *ibid*) as if to imply that this "actual sense" rules out a figurative sense. Moreover, he says that the natural disasters described in the historical narratives actually happened to punish past nations. To give these events a metaphorical meaning, however, would not be the same as to say that these events never really occurred.

By admitting that we must take the cultural environment of the period into account in order to determine the meaning of a word (*jaisa ke 'umuman zamana qadim mein riwaj raha hai*, *ibid*, p. 444), Islahi recognizes a distinction between the cultural meaning given to a word and its actual meaning (*apne haqiqi ma'ni*, *ibid*, p. 427). But he does clarify what he means by the "actual meaning" and how to obtain it.

One is left with the impression that Islahi understands the word *hijrah* according to the understanding he has inherited from the *subsequent* history of Islam. If this is the case with the concept of migration (*hijrah*), it could well be the case that Islahi's reading of the history of Islam has influenced other important concepts in his commentary. For instance, his reading of subsequent history may account for the traditional way he understands the *shari'ah* – particularly the laws of punishment in Islamic society.

Islahi constantly translates the phrase *amr allah* as the "punishment of God" rather than as the "judgment of God". He understands punishment in a traditional, anthropomorphic way. Moreover, since Islahi understands punishment in the light of the theme (*'umud*) of the whole Surah (*is roshni mein*), repeated references to punishment result in greater emphasis on the triumph of the believers and the utter destruction ("punishment") of the unbelievers.

Surah Al Isra (Bani Israil)

Introduction

This Surah is the twin of the preceding one. For this reason, there is no basic difference between this Surah and the previous one, as far as the theme ('umud) is concerned (*koi bunyadi farq nahin hai*, vol. 4, p. 469). The difference between the two Surahs lies in the fact that the previous Surah describes only in broad outlines what the present Surah presents in much more detail. For example, in the previous Surah, both the Quraysh and the Israelites were given an invitation and a warning but the Israelites were mentioned only in passing. In contrast with the previous Surah, the present Surah addresses the Israelites explicitly and the Surah draws arguments from their own history to show that the Israelites were only deceiving themselves when they claimed they were the beloved or chosen people of God. Islahi says their own history bears witness (*tumhari apni tarikh shahid hai*, *ibid*) that God punishes them whenever the Israelites rebel against God. Islahi seems to be using the Torah as his historical source (cf. *ibid*, p. 481).

Islahi goes on to say that this Surah reminds the Israelites to follow the straight path that the Torah had already pointed out to them (*jo taurat ke zara'e se tum par khuli gayi thi*, *ibid*). Furthermore, the Prophet's ascension has clarified the fact (*ye haqiqat bhi wazeh farmai gayi hai*, *ibid*) that the mandate entrusted to the Israelites to guard the sacred mosque has been taken away from them because they misused the trust bestowed upon them and that this mandate has now been transferred to the unlettered Prophet (*amanat khainon se chin kar is nabi ummi ke hawalah karne ka faislah ho cuka hai*, *ibid*, p. 469).

Another example that shows how this Surah provides detailed illustrations where the previous Surah had only indicated the basic principles in their broad outlines is to be found in the way this Surah develops certain teachings that are similar to the Ten Commandments of the Torah, emphasizing that these Commandments are in harmony with the natural order of things (*goya insani fitrat aur qadim asmani ta'lim donon ham ahang hain*, *ibid*).

Finally, the previous Surah had made only a passing reference to the approaching migration to Medina (*hijrat*) but, according to Islahi, this Surah provides detailed instructions about it (for example, in verse 80, which

concerns the preparation for the migration) indicating that the time has now come for it to take place. For Islahi, this is evidence enough that the Surah was revealed just before the migration actually occurred (*ye surah hijrat ke qarib zamanah mein nazal hui*, ibid, p. 470).

The Coherence of the Surah

In his opening remarks, Islahi says that the theme (*'umud*) of the present Surah does not differ from the theme of the previous Surah (*donon ke 'umud mein koi bunyadi farq nahin hai*, ibid, p. 469). Moreover, after giving a summary of the contents of the Surah, Islahi concludes that it must now be obvious to the reader that each link in the Surah is connected to every other link in accordance with the predetermined central idea (*ek ma'in 'umud ke taht kis tarah is surah ki har kari dusri kari se mili hui hai*, ibid, p. 472). Islahi is quite clear about the central idea or theme of the Surah, which concerns the eventual victory of the Muslims and the defeat of the unbelievers. Many verses of the Surah will be viewed in the light of this central theme.

Using every opportunity to illustrate the theme (*'umud*) of Surah Group Three, Islahi finds an allusion to it in the very first verse of the present Surah, which speaks of the Prophet's mystic Night Journey (*mi'raj*). Commenting on a phrase from verse 1:

so that We might show him some of Our symbols,

Islahi explains the reason God showed the Prophet the Inviolable House of Worship (at Mecca) and the Remote House of Worship (at Jerusalem) was to indicate that the custodianship of these holy places had been taken away from those who had demonstrated they were not worthy of this responsibility and that it was now entrusted to the Prophet himself (*maqsud in ke dikane se zahir hai . . . ke ab ye sari amanat naqadron aur bad 'ahidon se chin kar ap ke hawale ki janey wali hai*, ibid, p. 475). According to Islahi, the purpose of the Night Journey was to strengthen the Prophet in this difficult period of his life by giving him a preview of what was going to happen (*jo kuch hone wala tha*, ibid), namely, the defeat of the unbelievers and the success of the Muslims.

Islahi finds a similar reference to the success of the Muslims in a phrase from verse 79:

and thy Sustainer may well raise thee to a glorious station (in the life to come).

Islahi says the phrase refers to the Muslims' expectations of becoming an established community (*ye tawaq' rakho ke tumhara rab tumhen is hal mein utayega ke ek 'azim ummat ki zabanon par tumhare liye tarana hamd hoga*, ibid, p. 532). Similarly, the phrase from verse 60:

And lo! We said unto thee, (O Prophet:) "Behold, thy Sustainer encompasses all mankind (within His knowledge and might)", refers, according to Islahi, to the imminent conquest of Mecca (*ye bat is waqt farmai gayi thi jab ataraf makka mein islam pahlne laga aur makka aur ahl makka goya ahista ahista islam ke ghirey mein a rahe they*, ibid, p. 516). Islahi says that the same meaning is conveyed by verse 41 of Surah *Ar Rad* and verse 44 of Surah *Al Anbiya*. He understands these verses as the prophecy of an actual event rather than as just the expression of an imaginary idea (*ye baten hawai nahin thiy balke halat in ki saf peshangoi kar rahe they*, ibid), since the stubborn leaders of Mecca were actually going to taste defeat at the hands of the Muslims (cf. ibid). In fact, in all these verses, Islahi finds the same warning concerning the transfer of the mandate for custodianship of the holy places from the Quraysh to the Muslims that he had discovered in the first verse of the Surah (*tauliyat o amanat in ke maujudah khain mutawaliyon se chin kar nabi salla allahu alayhi wa sallam aur ap par iman laney walon ke hawala ki janey wali hai*, ibid).

Another verse that expresses the 'umud of the Surah is verse 81:

And say: "The truth has now come (to light), and falsehood has withered away;

for, behold, all falsehood is bound to wither away!"

Islahi says that the imminent migration (*hijrat*) represents the opening phase of the coming victory of the Muslims over Mecca (*hijrat dar haqiqat rasul ki fatah ka dibacha hoti hai*, ibid, p. 532). The present verse functioned as an affirmation of the eventual victory of the Prophet (*ye ayat parhte jate goya is ayat ka masdaq manassa-i-shauhud par a gaya*, ibid, p. 533). Islahi says that the approaching migration of the Muslims is thus a key to understanding the Surah (cf. ibid).

The Social and the Polemical Context

One of the principal ways in which Islahi specifies the social context of the verses is by stipulating to whom these verses were first directed. For example, he says that it is quite clear that verse 53 was directed to the Muslims to guide them while they were being harassed by their opponents (*musalmanon ko zaruri hidayat*, ibid, p. 511). The verses that follow are a

response to the polemical situation between the Muslims and the Jews (*yahud . . . apni tamam fitna samaniyon ke sath maidan mukhalafat mein utar aye*, *ibid*, p. 512). Moreover, verses 80-81 are not simply a general instruction in prayer:

“O my Sustainer! Cause me to enter (upon whatever I may do) in a manner true and sincere, and cause me to leave (it) in a manner true and sincere, and grant me, out of Thy grace, sustaining strength!”

In fact, these verses refer to the specific departure and arrival that is about to take place during the process of migration (*ap ka niklna aur dakhil hona*, *ibid*, p. 532). Furthermore, Islahi says that verse 83 does not describe a characteristic of mankind in general:

(it often happens that) when We bestow Our blessings upon man, he turns away and arrogantly keeps aloof (from any thought of Us);

Instead, the phrase refers specifically to the Quraysh (*al insan ka lafz agarche 'am hai lekin yahan is se murad quraysh ke wohi ashrrar o mufsidin hain*, *ibid*, p. 533). These verses belong to a specific social context.

A further example of the way Islahi situates each verse in its social context is the way he links the “nine clear messages” mentioned in verse 101 with the excessive demands of the Quraysh for miracles (*quraysh ye mau'jizat ke mutalbe*, *ibid*, p. 544). Likewise, Islahi describes the context of the story about Adam and the angels, related in verses 61-65, by setting it in the context (*siyaq o sabaq kalam*, *ibid*, p. 519) of encouragement and consolation for the Prophet, whose message was being rejected (*tasalli di ja rahi hai*, *ibid*). He says that other aspects of the story have already been discussed in Surah *Al Baqarah* and Surah *Al A'raf*.

Sometimes, however, Islahi inserts his own personal reflections into his commentary on the Surah, disregarding the context of the verse. For example, verse 31 says:

Hence, do not kill your children for fear of poverty; it is We who shall provide sustenance for them as well as for you. Verily, killing them is a great sin.

Instead of understanding this verse in the light of the context at the time of revelation, as he usually does when discussing any verse, Islahi inserts his own views with regard to the modern phenomenon of family planning (*maujuda zamane mein zabat wiladat*, *ibid*, p. 499). But the verse was revealed in the context of the practice of infanticide, which was common at that time.

Likewise, Islahi inserts his own personal opinion into his comment on verse 32:

And do not commit adultery - for, behold, it is an abomination and an evil way.

Islahi says that adultery cuts at the root of society (*ye burai saleh mu'sharah ki jar par kalhara marne wali burai hai*, ibid). In fact, Islahi goes on to give his own personal views on the nature of Islamic society in general (*islami mu'share*, ibid, p. 497) and about Islamic law as well (*hamare nazdik maujuda qawanin islami qanun ki bahut si barkaton se khali hain*, ibid, p. 501). Islahi is of the opinion that reason and nature are at the basis of society and even of the whole of civilization (*yahi rasta fitrat aur 'aql ka sidha rasta hai aur yahi is 'adl o ihsan ki zindagi ko wujud mein lata hai jo khuda ko pasind hai aur jis par saleh mu'sharah aur saleh tamaddun ki bunyad hai*, ibid, p. 491). According to Islahi, the Qur'an wants to establish a specific kind of society (*quran jo mu'sharah qaim karna chahta hai*, ibid, p. 502). In these instances, Islahi disregards the context and allows his own personal views to dominate the investigation of the verses.

Different Kinds of Language

Many examples can be found of Islahi's *prima facie* way of understanding the Surah. For instance, Islahi makes a simple comment about the graphic language of verses 13-14:

And every human being's destiny have We tied to his neck; and on the Day of Resurrection We shall bring forth for him a record which he will find wide open; (and he will be told:) "Read this thy record! Sufficient is thine own self today to make out thine account!"

Islahi says these verses are an expression of the fact that there will be no one to turn to for help on the Day of Judgment (*hisab ke din koi bhi kisi dusre ka boj utane wala nahin banega*, ibid, p. 488), disregarding other possible meanings that could emerge from a consideration of the kind of vivid language and style used in these verses. He has a similar approach to verse 71 in which people will be told to "read their record", saying that the verb "to read" is used here in its actual meaning (*apne haqiqi ma'ni mein iste'mal hua hai*, ibid, p. 525). Furthermore, the phrase from verse 64: "and bear upon them with all thy horses and all thy men" is not a metaphor but a description of what really happened during the struggle between the Muslims and their opponents (*mahz ista'rah hi nahin hai, balke amr waqe' bhi hai. wo tamam janggen jo dushman-i-islam ne ahl iman ko din haq se phirne ke liye barpa ki hain, wo sab is mein dakhil hain*, ibid, p. 520).

On the other hand, we also find examples of symbolic interpretation in Islahi's commentary. For instance, Islahi denies that the Night Journey of the Prophet was simply a dream (*khwab ke ma'ni mein lena kisi tarah sahih nahin hai*, p. 475). Citing verse 60, Islahi implies that it was more than simply an event. For it was a vision:

We have ordained that the vision which We have shown thee.
Furthermore, the image of tenderness in the command of verse 24 to:

spread over them humbly the wings of thy tenderness
is considered by Islahi to be a metaphorical expression (*ista'are mein ye talmih muzmar hai*, *ibid*, p. 496). Again, in the idiomatical expression of verse 29:

And neither allow thy hand to remain shackled to thy neck,
Islahi finds a reference to extreme miserliness (*ta'bir hai intihai bukhhl aur khissat ki*, *ibid*, p. 498). Moreover, the "tree of hell" in verse 60 is a symbol that is meant to be a warning (*ghaflat ke mate log mutanbih hon*, *ibid*, p. 517) just as the phrase from verse 1: "He alone is all-hearing, all-seeing" is an expression of warning for the Quraysh and for the Israelites (*mushrikin quraysh aur bani israil donon ko mutanbih karta hai*, *ibid*, p. 476)

Finally, the parable in verses 66-69 can be applied to two kinds of people (*do grohon ki tamsil*, *ibid*, p. 521) but Islahi wants to apply the parable primarily to the Quraysh, who were the first to be addressed in it (*jo quran ke mukhatab awal they*, *ibid*). Yet he accepts that the parable may have a wider application because it is expressed in general terms (*'am alfaz mein farmai gayi hai*, *ibid*). Islahi reasserts the need for people to listen to the voice of their human nature and to follow the dictates of their reason in order to be able to understand the message of the Qur'an (*iman o hidayat ki rah ye hai ke insan apni fitrat ki sadaon par kan dhre aur apni 'aql ki rahnumai ko qabul kare*, *ibid*, p. 523). The encouragement to use one's reason would seem to suggest the importance of further investigating the different ways the Qur'an makes use of language.

The way of God

The way that God does things (*sunnat-i-ilahi*) and the nature and scope of a Prophet's task in the world (*itmam-i-hujjat*) are concepts with which Islahi moves beyond the specific context he has been describing. Islahi derives these concepts from verses 15-16:

Whoever chooses to follow the right path, follows it but for his own good; and whoever goes astray, goes but astray to his own hurt; and no bearer of burdens shall be made to bear another's burden.

Moreover, We would never chastise (any community for the wrong they may do) ere We have sent an apostle (to them).

But when (this has been done, and) it is Our will to destroy a community, We convey Our last warning to those of its people who have lost themselves entirely in the pursuit of pleasures; and (if) they (continue to) act sinfully, the sentence (of doom) passed on the community takes effect, and We break it to smithereens.

God never punishes a nation before sending them a prophet who is able to provide them with all the evidence they need for faith. God always sends an Apostle before bringing destruction to a nation of evil doers (*rasul itmam-i-hujjat ka akhri zariy'ah hota hai*, *ibid*, p. 514). If a nation persists in wrongdoing, the prophet will depart from them and they will be punished (*nabi ne hijrat farmai aur qaum 'azab-i-ilahi ki grift mein a gayi hai*, *ibid*, p. 489). But it is God who will decide when and how this will happen (*allah . . . faislah farmayega*, *ibid*, p. 542). Verse 46 expresses the "sealing of hearts" (*khatm qalub*, *ibid*, p. 509) is another aspect of "the way of God" that has already been discussed at length in Surah *Al Baqarah* (*sunnat-i-ilahi ke har pahlui ki wazahat kar chuke hain*, *ibid*).

Conclusions

Since Islahi views the present Surah in the light of his formulation of the theme about the victory of the Muslims and the defeat of the unbelievers, he finds similarities between the present Surah and the previous one (*koi bunyadi farq nahin hai*, ibid, p. 469). Without the perspective of this theme ('*umud*), however, the present Surah could be understood in many respects as quite different in subject matter to Surah *An Nahl*.

In his introduction, Islahi says that the present Surah differs from the previous Surah in that it addresses the Israelites explicitly. However, Surah *Al Isra* directs only a few verses to the Israelites. Islahi also says that the present Surah develops certain teachings similar to the Ten Commandments. It seems to me that many such details were already included in other Surahs. In other words, they are not peculiar to Surah *Al Isra*.

Although Islahi considers that verse 80 makes a clear reference to the migration (*hijrah*), and that it was revealed just prior to the migration, many other scholars are of the opinion that it was revealed three or four years before the migration. Furthermore, Islahi understands verse 60 as a reference to the imminent conquest of Mecca. Yet scholars say that the Surah was revealed at least eight years before the victory of Mecca. In similar fashion, Islahi finds many verses that refer to the transfer of the mandate for custodianship of the House of Prayer – an event that took place many years after these verses were revealed.

Islahi considers it to be obvious to anyone who reflects on this Surah that all its parts are interconnected in accordance with the predetermined central idea (*ek ma'in 'umud ke taht kis tarah is surah ki har kari dusri kari se mili hui hai*, ibid, p. 472). He illustrates what he regards as an evident conclusion by showing repeatedly how the verses of the Surah support the main theme ('*umud*) of victory for the Muslims and defeat for the Quraysh. In the light of (*is roshni mein*) this theme ('*umud*), according to Islahi, the first verse of the Surah is not simply a reference to the Inviolable House of Worship but indicates that the custodianship of this sacred place has been entrusted to the Prophet himself.

Furthermore, in the light of the main theme ('*umud*) of the Surah, Islahi claims that the Night Journey of the Prophet has a special purpose, namely, to strengthen the Prophet by giving him a preview of what was actually

about to happen. Islahi has failed to mention the parallel verses (*nazair*) to the *mi'raj* that occur in Surah *An Najm*.

Consequently, it is in the light of the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah that Islahi understands verses 80-81 to be not a simple instruction on prayer but a reference to the departure and arrival that was about to take place during the migration. Moreover, verse 83 does not refer to humanity in general but to the Quraysh in particular (*al insan ka lafz agarche 'am hai lekin yahan is se murad quraysh ke wohi ashraf o mufsidin hain*, *ibid*, p. 533). Similarly, the parable in verses 66-69 is applied directly to the Quraysh, though it may have a wider application (*'am al-faz mein farmai gayi hai*, *ibid*, p. 521). Furthermore, the “nine clear messages” of 101 must be understood in the light of the objections being raised by the Quraysh. Likewise, the story about Adam and the angels must be seen in the context (*siyaq o sabaq kalam*, *ibid*, p. 519) of the consolation and encouragement that was provided for the Prophet (*tasalli di ja rahi hai*, *ibid*). Islahi's understanding of the theme (*'umud*) has influenced his interpretation of all these verses.

In addition, Islahi adds his own personal reflections with regard to modern methods of family planning in his comment on verse 31, a verse that had no direct link with family planning when it was revealed. Likewise, Islahi takes the liberty to propose his own theories about adultery and about the nature of Islamic society and law (*hamare nazdik maujuda qawanin islami qanun ki bahut si barkaton se khali hain*, *ibid*, p. 501). Islahi proceeds to make further comments on society and civilization. In these sections of his commentary, Islahi has become an author presenting his own views.

Islahi prefers the “actual” meaning of the phrase: “and bear upon them with all thy horses and all thy men” in verse 64 (*apne haqiqi ma'ni mein iste'mal hua hai*, *ibid*, p. 525). The verse is not a metaphor but refers to what actually happened (*mahz ista'rah hi nahin hai, balke amr waqe' bhi hai*, *ibid*, p. 520). Islahi does not explain why such an expression could not be a metaphor in the way that other verses employ symbolic language.

Finally, Islahi stresses the need for readers of the Qur'an to listen to the voice of their human nature and to follow the dictates of reason in order to be able to understand the message of the Qur'an (*apni 'aql ki rahnumai ko qabul kare*, *ibid*, p. 523). Islahi's encouragement to use reason suggests the need for further investigation into new ways of understanding the Qur'an.

Surah Al Kahf

Introduction

At the beginning of his opening remarks to a discussion of this Surah, Islahi describes the historical context in which it was revealed, presents its main theme and mentions its link with the previous Surah (*surah ka zamana nuzul, 'umud aur sabiq surah se ta'lluq*, vol. 4, p. 551). He asserts that it was revealed when the struggle between truth and falsity at the time of the last Prophet was in its last stages. The Quraysh had become convinced that the beckoning voice of the Qur'an would soon be silenced forever (*quran ki da'wat ko mita dene par tul gaye they*, *ibid*), while the Jews and the Christians were siding with the Quraysh secretly in the hope that they themselves could avoid direct confrontation with the Muslims.

In view of this socio-political context in (*halat ke taqaze se*, *ibid*), the Surah highlights the following points. Firstly, a warning is given to the Quraysh to refrain from giving preference to their worldly pursuits while turning a deaf ear to the self-evident truth being proclaimed to them. God's punishment is nigh. Secondly, the Prophet and his followers are encouraged to endure the oppression they are suffering since the migration is about to take place and they are told that certain (hitherto unknown) legal steps will soon be taken. Thirdly, Islahi makes the point that whereas, in the previous Surah (*Al Isra*), the real attitude of the Jews was exposed, in the present Surah (*Al Kahf*) and in the following one (*Surah Maryam*), the attitude taken by the Christians will similarly be exposed. All this is meant as a warning for the Quraysh.

Islahi says that one characteristic of the coherence of the Qur'an (*nazm-i-quran ki is khususiyat*, *ibid*, p. 622) is to be found in the fact that a Surah usually ends with the topic on which it started (*suraten bilu'mum is mazmun par khatm hoti hain jis mazmun se in ka aghaz hota hai*, *ibid*). Surah *Al Kahf* provides an example of this characteristic (*cf. ibid*).

The Appeal to Reason

Islahi stresses the use of reason in his opening remarks. As verse 1 says:

All praise is due to God, who has bestowed this divine writ from on high upon His servant, and has not allowed any deviousness to obscure its meaning.

Islahi concludes that any reasonable person will be able to discern the signs of the straight path that God provides for all people (*sirat mustaqim . . . ke mustaqim hone ke dalail 'aql o fitrat aur afaq o anfus ke har goshe mein maujud hain aur quran ne in ko itne gonagon tariqon se bayan kar dia hai ke koi 'aql ke kam lene wala in ke samajhne se qasar nahin rah sakta*, ibid, p. 557).

Islahi emphasizes the point by saying that only those persons who do not make use of their reason can fail to recognize God's signs (*sirf wahi in se mahrum rahenge jo 'aql se kam nahin le rahe hain*, ibid) and says that the same message is contained in verse 9 of *Al Isra*: "Verily, this Qur'an shows the way to all that is most upright" (ibid).

According to Islahi, verse 7 affirms the ability of human reason and discernment:

Behold, We have willed that all beauty on earth be a means by which We put men to a test, (showing) which of them are best in conduct.

Mankind has the ability to deal with the test of endurance that God has ordained for all people (*is mein ham ye dekh rahe hain ke kaun apni 'aql o tamyez se kam le kar akhirat ka talib banta hai*, ibid, p. 558). In fact, no one can face the Last Day successfully if he is careless about what his own heart tells him (*wo log jinhone apni 'aql o dil ke angken andhi kar li hain*, ibid, p. 599).

The same rational approach is discernible in Islahi's comment on verse 44:

For thus it is: all protective power belongs to God alone, the True One. He is the best to grant recompense, and the best to determine what is to be.

Islahi says that God punishes, either in this world or the next, in order to provide justice for the virtuous. The logical consequence of this is to punish the evildoers (*'azab-i-dunya ho ya 'azab-i-akhirat is se asal maqsud nekon ki dadrasi hai. badon ko saza dena is ka asal maqsud nahin balke lazmi natija hai*, ibid, p. 588). In other words, although Islahi frequently points out that the message of punishment for unbelief is couched in the language of warning and threat, he also makes a rational argument about the logical need for recompense and punishment in order to bolster his concept of the thematic coherence of the Qur'an.

The language of warning is evident, for instance, in verses 50-59, in which God consoles the Prophet by reminding him that his responsibility is solely to warn and not to bring punishment (*peghambar salla allahu alayhi wa sallam ko tasalli di ke rasul ka kam 'azab lana nahin hota balke sirf inzar o tabshir hota hai*, ibid, p. 592). Even though the message should be clear to any rational person, the Prophet is told to wait for the completion or perfection of the arguments which will be accomplished in God's own time (*ab in ka ma'mlah allah ke hawale karo aur sabr ke sath apne kam mein lage raho ta ke in par achhi tarah hujjat tamam ho jaye*, ibid, p. 598).

The Social Context

Islahi finds a resemblance between the story of the cave and the difficulties the Prophet and his companions were facing in Mecca and says that, just as the men found shelter in the cave, so the Prophet and his companions took shelter in a cave during their migratory journey to Ethiopia and to Medina (*jis tarah ashab-i-kahf apne mahaul mein hadif-i-mazalim bane they isi tarah an hazrat salla allahu alayhi wa sallam aur ap ke sahaba bhi quraysh ke mazalim ke hadaf they aur jis tarah ashab-i-kahf ko ghar mein panah leni pari isi tarah ap aur ap ke sahaba ke samne bhi hijrat habasha, ghar-i-saur aur hijrat medina ke marahil ane wale they*, ibid, p. 561). The story is thus an image of what actually happened to the Prophet and his companions, providing them with a lesson in dealing with their difficult experiences in Mecca just prior to the migration (*nihayat sabaq amuz ho sakti thi is liye ke ap aur ap ke sahaba inhi marahil se guzar rahe they jin se ashab-i-kahf ko guzar na para tha*, ibid, p. 560). In short, Islahi applies the parable of the men in the cave to the specific event of the migration.

Islahi introduces the group of verses 9-26, which include the story of the men in the cave, with a discussion about the addressee for verse 9:

dost thou (really) think that (the parable of) the Men of the Cave and of (their devotion to) the scriptures could be deemed more wondrous than any (other) of Our messages?

Islahi says that the pronoun "thou" does not necessarily refer to the Prophet but could refer to the individuals of a group or to the group itself for the sake of emphasis (*khitab zaruri nahin ke an hazrat salla allahu alayhi wa sallam hi se ho balke "a lam tara" ke khitab ki tarah*

ye 'am bhi ho sakta hai, *ibid*, p. 566). Even if the pronoun is in the singular, the addressee could still be a group (*mukhatab groh se hai*, *ibid*).

Islahi does not substantiate his claim that the story of the men in the cave originated in Christian history (*nisara apni tarikh ke ibtidai daur mein*, *ibid*) but he does make assertions about Christianity as a background to the story. This enables him to suggest the reason why the story appears in the Surah (cf. *ibid*, p. 561). Islahi claims that the question in verse 9 refers to the claim the Jews and the Christians were making that their religion was better than the new religion of the Prophet (*sawal utane walon ki is pas pardah zahaniyat ko samne rakh kar*, *ibid*). According to Islahi, the Surah stresses that the wonderful story of the men in the cave is only one of so many of God's great signs and that no one group has a monopoly of these signs (*in par kisi khas groh ka ajarah nahin hai*, *ibid*, p. 567).

The story is thus a reminder to the young people who were joining the new group of believers that they should take courage from the story of the men in the cave and not lose heart at the hostility of their contemporaries (*iman lane wale nau jawanon ko tawaja dala di ke wo is sar gusast se sabaq hasil karen*, *ibid*, p. 569). It is clear that Islahi sees the story as a response to the polemical questions that were being raised during the time of revelation.

Islahi also sets the last part of verse 21 in the polemical context of the Jews, Christians and the Muslims of the period (cf. *ibid*, p. 575). The second part of the verse reads:

And so, some (people) said: "Erect a building in their memory; God knows best what happened to them." Said they whose opinion prevailed in the end: "Indeed, we must surely raise a house of worship in their memory!"

According to Islahi, these words refer to the building of mosques since the Jews and the Christians originally worshipped in mosques (*yahud aur nisara ke 'ibadat khane aslan masjid hi they*, *ibid*). The reference to houses of worship in verse 21 does not refer to mosques in the narrow sense of the word, however, but rather in the wider sense of a mosque as a place for prayer.

It is interesting how Islahi situates verse 28 in its social context:

And contain thyself in patience by the side of all who at morn
and at evening invoke their Sustainer, seeking His countenance,
and let

not thine eyes pass beyond them in quest of the beauties of this
world's life; and pay no heed to any whose heart We have
rendered heedless of all remembrance of Us because he had
always followed (only) his own desires, abandoning all that is
good and true.

Islahi says the verse is directed to the Prophet who was neglecting his
companions and turning his attention to the rich and the powerful
(*apni qaum ke sardaron aur maldaron*, *ibid*, p. 581). Islahi adds that
the Prophet was not really interested in their wealth and power but
only in promoting religion (*sirf din ki sar bulandi ki khatr*, *ibid*)
because the Prophet hoped the rich and the powerful would open the
way for others to come to faith (*dusron ke iman ki rah kolega*, *ibid*).
However, the Prophet is told to give more attention to the believers.
Islahi concludes by expecting scholars of Arabic to understand that
the verse is aimed, not at the Prophet, but at the proud and the wealthy
(*mutakbarin aur aghniya ki taraf hai*, *ibid*), who looked down on the
companions of the Prophet (*jo sahaba ko haqir samajhte*, *ibid*) and
who promised to listen to him provided the Prophet was prepared to
distance himself from these people whom they considered to be
inferior (cf. *ibid*).

Accordingly, verses 30-31 are directed to these very companions, who
were considered of low esteem by the wealthy, promising them a
reward of a kind they would understand in their own social context (*is
wajh se in ke sulah ke bayan mein in chizon ko khas taur par numayan
kiya gaya hai jo waqt ke amara ke liye sarmaya fakhr o naz thiy*, *ibid*,
p. 582). In other words, the social background explains why the verse
uses words like gold, garments of silk and brocade in order to describe
the reward the companions could expect in heaven.

Similarly, the social context of verse 46 is significant:

Wealth and children are an adornment of this world's life: but
good deeds, the fruit whereof endures forever, are of far greater
merit in thy Sustainer's sight, and a far better source of hope.

Islahi says the language of the verse mirrors the values of Arabic
society, which highly esteemed those with offspring (*wo apni bahami
mufakharat ki majlison mein kasrat-i-aulad ka zikr khas taur par*

karte, *ibid*, p. 591). Likewise, Islahi supplies the cultural background for verse 50, which speaks of *iblis* as "one of those invisible beings", saying that Arab unbelievers worshipped these invisible beings in various forms (*mushrikin 'arab jinnat ko mukhtalif shaklon mein pujte the*, *ibid*, p. 596).¹⁰⁸ Islahi describes the way these Arabs were ready even to sacrifice their children in order to avoid reprisals by these invisible beings (cf. *ibid*).¹⁰⁹ Thus, the social and cultural background is also significant for Islahi.

Although verse 54 speaks of all mankind:

Thus, indeed, have We given in this Qur'an many facets to every kind of lesson (designed) for (the benefit of) mankind, Islahi restricts the scope of the word for "mankind" (*an nas*) to the context of the unbelieving Arabs described in these verses (*insan se wohi jagralo mukhatib hain jin se yahan bahs chal rahi hai*, *ibid*, p. 597). Likewise, in verse 55, there is a general reference to all people in the opening question:

What is there to keep people from attaining to faith? Islahi says the context of these verses will explain the reference to "all people" ("*an nas*" *se murad yahan bhi wohi log hain jin se bahs chal rahi hai*, *ibid*). This illustrates the way Islahi sets the Surah in a specific context.

Different Kinds of Language

Islahi seems to move between seeing certain verses in terms of symbolic expression and others in a *prima facie* manner. For instance, Islahi provides a metaphorical explanation of the extremely long period that the men spent in the cave by saying that God gave them a restful sleep (*nihayat aram o sakun ki nind tari ki di*, *ibid*, p. 568). Islahi seems to accept the version commonly accepted by the classical scholars that God "veiled their ears with sleep".¹¹⁰ Islahi even says that the phrase is a very fine metaphor to indicate the way they were lulled to sleep (*ye alfaz bataur ista'rah iste'mal hue hain aur piyar ke sath sulane ke liye ye nihayat balig ista'rah hai*, *ibid*, p. 568). In fact, the whole story of the men in the cave is one of the

¹⁰⁸ This statement is misleading because the Arabs never worshipped *iblis*.

¹⁰⁹ The Arabs never sacrificed their children, however. The Qur'an, the hadith and the books of history all attest to this fact. Islahi does not provide any evidence to support his assertion.

¹¹⁰ See, for example, Asad (1980), p. 440, note 9.

many signs or symbols provided by God for the benefit of mankind (*apne bandon ke liye ek aisa ghar muhiya farma dia*, *ibid*, p. 571) by means of which God provided for all their needs (*in ke liye sari zaruriyat-i-zindagi farahim thiy*, *ibid*). However, by all mankind (*apne bandon*), Islahi may well have in mind only those believers who were living at the time of revelation.

On the other hand, Islahi seems to abandon the symbolic or figurative character of the story by analyzing such phrases about turning over in one's sleep in verse 18:

And We caused them to turn over repeatedly, now to the right,
now to the left

in terms of biological necessity (*ye karvat saihat jasmani ko barqrar rakhne ke liye zaruri hai*, *ibid*, p. 572). Islahi even understands the dog, mentioned in the same verse, as fulfilling a specific function, thereby losing the overall symbolic nature of the story (*cf. ibid*). Islahi applies the story to the conflicts and debates that were going on at the time of revelation (*zahir hai ke ye tanaz'a mukhtalif grohon, firqon aur khandanon mein waqe' hua hoga*, *ibid*, p. 575), understanding the story in terms of the arguments that were going on between the Muslims, the Jews and the Christians. In one particular argument, the Muslims won the day (*masjid ta'mir karne ka faislah kiya aur yahi rahe ghalib rahe*, *ibid*).

Similarly, the last verses of the Surah (verses 99-110) speak of the way punishment will finally come. As verse 99 says:

And on that Day We shall (call forth all mankind and) leave them to surge like waves (that dash) against one another; and the trumpet (of judgment) will be blown, and We shall gather them all together.

Islahi recognizes the figurative language used in this verse (*ye baten agarcheh mutashabahat ki nau'iyat ki hain*, *ibid*, p. 625), but claims that even modern science cannot prevent such occurrences from happening on the Last Day (*cf. ibid*). In other words, the events described in this verse are going to happen in some kind of material or physical sense as well. Likewise, verse 109 expresses the extent and majesty of God's messages:

Say: "If all the sea were ink for my Sustainer's words, the sea would indeed be exhausted ere my Sustainer's words are exhausted! And (thus it would be) if we were to add to it sea upon sea."

Yet Islahi says that the verse does not resort to exaggeration and prefers to accept the language according to its *prima facie* meaning (*ye sarta sar bayan-i-haqiqat hai. is mein zara barabar bhi mubalagha nahin hai*, *ibid*, p. 626). Islahi wants to include the figurative language of the Qur'an in the category of logical reason.

Furthermore, Islahi seems to be well aware of the fact that, when the Qur'an uses parables, it uses language and concepts that are part of the contemporary culture (*quran in chizon ke bayan mein ahl 'arab hi ki ma'lumat aur inhi ke zauq ko malhuz rakhta hai is liye ke tashbih aur tamsil mein mu'assir wohi chizen hoti hain jin se mukhatab waqif hon*, *ibid*, p. 582). Consequently, the language of these parables must be understood according to the way those to whom they were first addressed understood them, without thereby exhausting their meaning. For example, the parable of the two men, in verses 32-33, narrates that one of them owned two vineyards. Islahi says that the garden described in this parable fits with the image of a perfect garden common among the Arabs (*ahl 'arab ke nazdik behterin bagh ka tasawwur*, *ibid*, p. 585). Naturally, the purpose of the story is not to describe a perfect garden but to provide a symbol of prosperity and fruitfulness that would not have been missed by those to whom it was addressed.

However, instead of inquiring into the symbolic nature of the parable of Moses and his quest for knowledge narrated in verses 60-82, Islahi begins by providing his own reasoned opinions as to the meaning of the parable under three headings (cf. *ibid*, p. 599). He also states his own opinion as to the meaning of phrases such as "the junction of the two seas", saying it is a reference to a specific place ("*majmu' albahrain*" *se murad ghalban khaliya 'aqaba aur suez ka wo maqam ittisal hai*, *ibid*, p. 604). Islahi adds his own details to the story by saying that Moses and his servant were having breakfast (*nashta kar ke*, *ibid*, p. 605) and that the fish they were going to eat was roasted (*machli buni hui thiy*, *ibid*). These examples indicate that Islahi is sometimes more concerned about establishing factual information than he is about the symbolic nature of the story.

At the end of his comments on the story, Islahi draws some very general conclusions. He says that the story instructs believers to be patient in adversity (*ahl iman ko chahiye ke wo is par sabr karen*,

ibid, p. 609). Islahi simply says that the parable is an example of something that generally happens in the world (*ye misal hai*, ibid, p. 610). In short, Islahi sees the parable in the light of the social conditions prevailing at the time of revelation. At the same time, he draws a conclusion that goes beyond that specific context.

After saying that many former commentators have discussed the historical identity of the "Two-Horned One" (verses 83-98), Islahi proceeds to consider various possible figures taken from history (*tarikh ki roshni mein bhi sabut hain*, ibid, p. 612). He quotes passages from Isaiah and from Daniel without showing due care for the original context of these quotations (cf. ibid, p. 613). Eventually, Islahi opts for Cyrus as a possible identity for this figure,¹¹¹ suggesting all kinds of geographical explanations (cf. ibid, p. 617) for the references in verse 86:

(And he marched westwards) till, when he came to the setting of the sun, it appeared to him that it was setting in a dark, turbid sea.

Islahi provides further geographical information to explain verses 92-98, mentioning by name: the Caspian Sea, Mongolia, Iran, Turkistan and Caucasia (ibid, pp. 620-621). Islahi finds it necessary to confirm his description of the "Two-Horned One" by historical references (*tarikhon se bhi is bat ki taid o tasdiq hoti hai*, ibid, p. 619). But he makes no distinction between Scriptural and non-Scriptural or secular history, drawing freely from these two different kinds of historical writing.¹¹²

¹¹¹ It was Maulana Kalam Azad who first suggested that the "Two-Horned One" was a reference to Cyrus.

¹¹² According to Muhammad Asad, the Two-Horned One "has nothing to do with history or even legend, and that its sole purport is a parabolic discourse on faith and ethics, with specific reference to the problem of worldly power". Asad (1980), p. 452, footnote 81.

Conclusions

Disregarding the evidence in the *Sirah*, in the *Hadith* and in former commentaries on the Qur'an (*tafasir*), which relate the occasion of revelation for the story of the cave in this Surah, Islahi connects the story with the period in which the Quraysh were oppressing the Muslims. In this way, the story becomes a warning for the Quraysh. However, the Quraysh were not acquainted with this story and there would have been better ways of warning them.

Furthermore, Islahi says the story is an image of what actually happened to the Prophet (peace be upon him) and his companions (*ap aur ap ke sahaba inhi marahil se guzar rahey they*, *ibid*, p. 560). It should be remembered, however, that only the Prophet and one companion, Abu Bakr, temporarily sheltered in a cave during the migration (*hijrah*) – an event that happened five years after the story was revealed. Therefore, the story could not have been understood as an image of their future experience.

In his introduction, Islahi says that the real attitude of the *Jews* was exposed in Surah *Al Isra*. He argues that, subsequently, in Surah *Al Kahf* and in Surah *Maryam* the behaviour of the *Christians* will be exposed in a similar way. Islahi has put the chronology of revelation back to front. These Surahs were revealed in the following order: *Maryam*, *Al Kahf*, *Al Isra*. Islahi disregards the fact that Surah *Maryam* was revealed before the other Surahs. Moreover, it is incorrect to say that a particular Surah refers to the *Jews* as a separate group and to the *Christians* as another separate group. Surah *Al Isra* (also named *Bani Israil*) is clearly concerned with both the *Jews* and the *Christians*, who were the *Bani Israil*.

Islahi appeals to reason (*'aql*) to provide confirmation for his formulation of the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah. Islahi is confident that any reasonable person is able to endure the trials of life provided the person uses his reason (*koi 'aql lene wala*, *ibid*, p. 557) and he appeals to rational argument to show how reward and punishment are simply the logical consequence of one's behaviour in the world. Other concepts, like *sunnat-i-ilahi* and *itmam hujjat* are not explained in the same rational manner.

While Islahi seems to understand the story of the men in the cave in a symbolic way, Islahi also seems to abandon the symbolic or figurative character of the story by his description of the way the men slept and by his explanation of the function of their dog. Islahi is sometimes more concerned about establishing factual information than he is about the symbolic nature of the story. He concludes that the story reflects the conflicts and debates that were going on between the Muslims, Jews and Christians of that time (*zahir hai ke ye tanaz' mukhtalif grohon, firqon aur khandanon mein waqiy'ah hua hoga*, ibid, p. 575). The story, therefore, depends for its meaning on its connection with actual events. This is another example of the way external evidence is needed to understand the Qur'an. In Surah Group Four, Islahi categorically rejects such external evidence.

Islahi says that verse 28 describes how the Prophet (peace be upon him) approached the wealthy and the powerful so that they would believe. Since Arabs were more impressed with descriptions of gold and garments of silk and brocade, the Surah uses these categories to communicate with them. Similarly, Islahi says that the language of verse 46 mirrors the values of Arabic society as it existed in that period and that verse 50 expresses the cultural background of society at that time. These values and symbols, however, do not exist only in Arabic society but have a wider connotation. Islahi fails to highlight this more universal dimension.

Commenting on the parable of Moses related in verses 60-82, Islahi adds his own reflections and simply concludes that the story instructs believers to be patient in adversity (*sabr karen*, ibid, p. 609). Islahi totally disregards the esoteric meaning of the story provided by the Surah itself in verses 78-82. Islahi misses the meaning of the parable by referring to it as just an example of things that happen in the world (*ye misal hai*, ibid, p. 610). On the other hand, Islahi takes pains to supply many historical references and much geographical information in order to explain the narrative about the "Two-horned One" in verses 83-98.

In short, Islahi's approach to the parables is inconsistent because he recognizes some verses as figurative expressions (*mutashabahat ki nau'iyat ke hain*, ibid, p. 625) while, at the same time, understanding many of the parables in their *prima facie* or material sense (*ye sarta*

sar bayan-i-haqiqat hai. is mein zara barabar bhi mubalagha nahin hai, ibid, p. 626).

Surah Maryam

Introduction

This Surah forms the second of a pair with the previous one. Islahi says there is no essential difference in theme ('*umud*) between the two Surahs, only a difference in the flow of thought and style of expression (*tariq-i-istadlal aur naihj bayan mein faraq hai*, vol. 4, p. 629). Islahi says that those who lived during the time of the earlier Prophets failed to live their lives according to the dictates of monotheism required of them by the original *din* (*asl din ki da'wat*, *ibid*). In the present age (the time of revelation), there are people who are opposing the same message presented by the last Prophet. The Surah invites the Prophet to be patient and to trust in the eventual overthrow of his opponents, whose fault consists in their misplaced trust in worldly power and accomplishment (*apni dunwi kamyabiyon ko apne barhaq hone ki dhil samajhte hain*, *ibid*). Far from justifying their behavior, worldly success should be understood as a respite (*dhil*) granted by God to enable his purposes to be accomplished (*khuda ki taraf se in ke liye dhil hai ke khuda ki hujjat in par puri ho jaye*, *ibid*).

The Socio-political Context

Islahi describes the context (*khas mauqa' o mahal*, *ibid*, p. 674) for this Surah as one of encouragement for the Prophet (*sabr o istiqamat ki talqin*, *ibid*) in the struggle between truth and falsity (*haq o batil ki kashmakash*, *ibid*). Dependent solely on the guidance he receives through revelation, the Prophet has to fortify the Muslim soldiers engaged at the war front (*jo mujahid dushmanon ki dal ba dal fauj ke muqabil mein muhaz par ho is ko markaz se rahnumai ka intizar har waqt rahta tha*, *ibid*). So God promises to provide him with the needed guidance at the appropriate time (*jis rahnumai aur madad ki zarurat hogi wo apne waqt par allah nazil farmaega*, *ibid*). This is the situation in which verse 64 was revealed:

And (the angels say): "We do not descend (with revelation), again and again, other than by thy Sustainer's command: unto Him belongs all that lies open before us and all that is hidden from us and all that is in-between. And never does thy Sustainer forget (anything)."

Islahi describes the socio-political context in some detail. He argues that mention is made in this Surah of Jesus and Mary because the Christians were, at this time, giving secret support to the Quraysh (cf. *ibid*, p. 629).

Islahi is referring here to the covert political support the Christians were providing for the Quraysh in their struggle with the Muslims, just as the Jews were already doing (*yahud ke tarah nisara ne bhi darpardah quraysh ki pushtpanahi sharu' kar di thi*, ibid). Such support from the People of the Book was a great boon for the Quraysh because of the esteem in which the People of the Book were held among the Arabs, who were illiterate (*ummi hone ke sabab se*, ibid). The fact that the Qur'an attempts to nullify the influence that the People of the Book were having on the Quraysh only goes to show the extent of their influence (*quran ne ahl kitab ke is asr ko batil karne ke liye in ki haqiqat wazeh ki*, ibid). Furthermore, the present Surah discredits the Christians, just as one of the previous Surahs (*Al Isra* or *Bani Israil*) had totally discredited the Jews (*bani israil mein yahud ka bilkul be bunyad hona wazeh kiya, aur is surah mein bilkul isi andaz mein nisara ki be sabati dikhai hai*, p. 629-630). Islahi says that the purpose of these revelations is to convince the Quraysh that there was no point in relying on people whose lives were not based on strong foundations (*jin ki apni koi bunyad nahin hai*, p. 630).

The political alliance Islahi refers to in his introduction is not described in the Surah as such. In fact, it is difficult to see how the Christians could have formed a solid front with the Quraysh against the Muslims since, as Islahi himself says, the Christians were so divided among themselves (*nisara ke bahmi ikhtilafat*, p. 650). However, the fact that they concealed the truth about the Prophets Abraham and Ishmael is further proof that the Jews were hostile to Islam (*islam dushmani ke josh*, ibid, p. 666). In fact, all the Jews and Christians are dismissed as a group together with the unbelievers because they did not obey the basic commandments, just as previous Surahs had shown (*yahud o nisara aur mushrikin ne din ke is bunyadi hukm ke sath jo ma'amlah kiya is ki tafsil surah baqarah, ahl 'imran, aur an'am waghera mein guzar chuki hai*, ibid, p. 668). Islahi even seems to imply that the Jews destroyed their religion (*jinhone khuda ka sara din to taraj kar ke rakh dia tha*, ibid, p. 669). In all these instances, Islahi portrays the Jews and the Christians in a negative light so that his theory about their political alliance with the Quraysh would appear more plausible.

In several places in his commentary, Islahi asserts that the Qur'an is not dependent on external material for it to be understood. Yet Islahi also makes frequent reference to Arabic traditions and customs in order to throw light

on the Qur'an.¹¹³ Moreover, verse 46 of this Surah records the threat of Abraham's father towards him:

I shall most certainly cause thee to be stoned to death!
Islahi finds it helpful to provide the background for this verse by describing the Arabic custom according to which certain people had unlimited authority or power over their subjects (*ye amr yahan milhuz rahe ke qabaili zindagi mein . . . bapon ko apne baiton aur baition par bilkul ghair mahdud ikhtiyarat hasil they*, *ibid*, p. 660). The verse should be understood in the light of this cultural background. Instead of restricting himself to the Arabic cultural background, however, Islahi should have provided the reader with some guidance on how to interpret this verse in a more universal way.

Similarly, from the context of the word for "man" in verse 66, it is quite clear (*qarina dalil hai*, *ibid*, p. 676) that specific Arab unbelievers (*mushrikin 'arab*, *ibid*) are being addressed:

With all this, man (often) says, 'What! Once I am dead, shall I again be brought forth alive?'

Islahi says it was inappropriate to address them directly because they denied any form of life after death (*goya wo laiq iltifat nahin is wajh se 'am sigha se bat kah di gayi*, *ibid*).¹¹⁴ Islahi goes on to describe the common understanding and beliefs of the Arab people because he says such information is important for understanding the text of the Surah (*mushrikin ke in mutanaqaz khayalat ko samne rakhe tab quran ke age ke mabhas samaj mein ayenge*, *ibid*).

Furthermore, the context for the word "satanic forces" in verse 68 is understood by Islahi in a similar way (*qarina dalil hai*, *ibid*, p. 677) to refer to the leaders of the Quraysh (*gumrah lidaron*, *ibid*). The same verse describes those condemned to hell as squatting "on their knees, around hell". Islahi explains how criminals of that period had to squat while waiting for their superiors to decide their fate (*jis tarah mujrim apna faislah sunane ke liye kisi hukmran ke samne baitate hain*, *ibid*).¹¹⁵ Those perverse leaders of the Quraysh, together with those who listened to their words, will be waiting around hell in the same way on judgment day. Islahi sees the verse as

¹¹³ Cf. Islahi's comment on verse 1 of Surah *Al Furqan*, vol. 5, p. 443. Islahi also makes frequent use of external sources by referring to books of traditions (*riwayat*) in Surah *AlAzab*.

¹¹⁴ Pre-Islamic poetry makes specific reference to life after death. It does not seem correct to assert that the Arabs did not believe in an after-life.

¹¹⁵ Islahi does not provide any evidence for his view that criminals of that period had to squat while awaiting their verdict.

highlighting the 'umud of the Surah, which is the eventual defeat of the Quraysh.

Transcending the Specific Context

Verses with a *specific* addressee or verses understood in a particular context are, however, given *general* applications. For example, verse 13 describes the qualities of John, but Islahi understands these qualities as belonging to all people (*ye na ho to insan insan nahin balke patar ki ek murat hai*, ibid, p. 639). Similarly, verses 47-48 contain the reply of the Prophet Abraham to his father, but Islahi draws general conclusions meant for all people (*jab tak admi mom ki tarah narm aur patar ki tarah sakhat na ho wo haq ki koi kidmat injam nahin de sakta*, ibid, p. 661).

Sometimes, Islahi moves in the opposite direction, that is, a word with a *general* connotation is considered to have a *particular* meaning. For example, in verse 66:

With all this, man (often) says, "What! Once I am dead, shall I again be brought forth alive?"

Islahi says the word for "man" refers specifically to Arab unbelievers rather than to human beings in general (*yahan lafz 'insan' agarcheh 'am hai lekin qarina dalil hai ke is se murad mushrikin 'arab hi hain*, ibid, p. 676). He restricts the word even further when he applies it to the upper classes (*amra o aghniya*, ibid) and the corrupt leaders (*gumrah lidaron*, ibid, p. 677) of Arab society. Similarly, Islahi restricts the scope of the pronoun "you" of verse 71:

And every one of you will come within sight of it.

The majority of commentators understood this pronoun to include all human beings, sinners and righteous alike,¹¹⁶ but Islahi says that the word applies in a specific way to the sinners spoken of in the preceding verses (*in mujrimon ko khitaab kar ke farmayega ke ab . . . tum mein se bila istasna har ek ko is jahanam mein utarna hai*, ibid, p. 678). In fact, Islahi is regularly restricting the meaning of words that could have a wider connotation and making them apply to the Quraysh.

Islahi's perception of society leads him to dichotomize between two groups of people, the virtuous and the non-virtuous. He views society in terms of a polarization between "people immersed in the world" (*dunya ke paristar*,

¹¹⁶ Asad (1980), p. 465, footnote 65.

ibid, p. 681) and “believing people” (*bandah mumin*, ibid). He divides society into the oppressors (*zalimon*, ibid, p. 679) and the God-fearing people (*ahl taqwa*, and *ahl haq*, ibid). It is a short step from such categorization to further labels of contempt as can be found in his reference to “the stupidity of the unbelievers” (*mushriqin ‘arab ki hamaqat*, ibid, p. 675) or to “foolish people” (*bewaquf logon*, ibid).

Different Kinds of Language

Verse 72 has a reference to the way evildoers will be present in hell:

And once again: We shall save (from hell) those who have been conscious of Us; but We shall leave in it the evildoers, on their knees.

Islahi’s material or physical way of understanding the verse leads him to suggest the need for special guardians or inspectors, whose job it will be to force these sinners to take up a crouching position while they wait for the doors of hell to open up. Since Islahi has taken these verses to describe an actual state of affairs rather than as a metaphor to express a strong warning of future suffering, Islahi leaves the reader with the image of a God who has abandoned his own people (*allah ta’ala in ko dozakh ke darogon ke hawalah kar ke isi halat mein chaur kar in se be iltifat ho jayega*, ibid, p. 677).

Islahi acknowledges that words are used in various ways in the Surah. For instance, the words from verse 65: “Worship, then, Him alone” is used in its widest sense (*apne wasi’ mafhum*, ibid, p. 676). He says the same word is used again in its widest meaning in Surah *Al Fatihah* (*is lafs ki ye haqiqat*, ibid) and in verse 44 of the present Surah (cf. ibid). Furthermore, Islahi says there are two meanings for the word “the right hand” from the following phrase in verse 52:

And (remember how) We called upon him from the right-hand slope of Mount Sinai.

Islahi prefers the more abstract connotation of “blessedness” after a study of Qur’anic parallels (*quran ke nazair se*, ibid, p. 663).

Moreover, in verse 25, Mary is told to “shake the trunk of the palm-tree”. Islahi says that Mary could not have done this without the special help of God (*warna zahir hai ke in ki quwwat-i-bazu itni kahan ke wo kajur ke drakhat ko hila den*, ibid, p. 646). Islahi takes the phrase in its physical, material or *prima facie* meaning, according to which Mary did shake the

trunk of the palm tree with the special help of God.¹¹⁷ Islahi also understands verse 90 in its *prima facie* sense:

whereat the heavens might well-nigh be rent into fragments, and the earth be split asunder, and the mountains fall down in ruins!

Islahi insists that this is not an exaggerated style of language but is an expression of factual reality (*ye amr wazeh rahe ke ye koi mubalagha ka uslub-i-bayan nahin hai balke ek haqiqat ka bayan hai*, *ibid*, p. 686). In other words, the words must be taken at their face value. We have already seen that Islahi's comments on verse 68, in which unbelievers are described as squatting around hell while waiting for judgment to be pronounced on them, indicates that Islahi understands this verse as a factual expression of reality (*sab ko jahanam ke ird gird is tarah ikata karenge ke wo mujrimon ki tarah duzaro baite hue apne faislah ka intizar karenge*, *ibid*, p. 677). The words describe an actual situation.

Islahi provides a further example of his approach to language in his discussion of verse 71 of Surah *Maryam*:

And every one of you will come with sight of it: this is, with thy Sustainer, a decree that must be fulfilled.

Islahi struggles to reconcile this verse with verses 101-102 of Surah *Al Anbiya*, which seem to say the opposite of the verse just quoted:

these will be kept far away from that (hell): no sound thereof will they hear; and they will abide in all that their souls have ever desired.

Islahi's solution is that, since (in Surah *Al Anbiya*) God promises the virtuous that they will be kept far from hell, verse 71 of Surah *Maryam* must be understood in a more specific way as applying only to the non-virtuous. Former commentators have wrongly applied the verse to everyone (*hamare mufassarin ne is ka mukhatab tamam bani nau insan ko man liya hai*, *ibid*, p. 678). These commentators have even devised the notion of a special bridge so that the virtuous can safely cross over hell on their way to heaven (*jahanam par pul sirat ke nam se ek pul hoga jis par se nek log to guzar jayenge*, *ibid*). But Islahi says that these commentators have misunderstood the characteristic style of the Qur'an (*uslub kalam ke na samajne ke sabab se hui hai*, *ibid*). Islahi does not give any further explanation of this particular Qur'anic style, but refers the reader to a book on the subject written by his teacher, Maulana Farahi (cf. *ibid*, p. 679).

¹¹⁷ Since palm trees in Arabia do not grow tall, however, Mary would not have needed the special help of God to shake the trunk of the palm tree.

Islahi is confronted with a similar problem in the next verse where he is compelled to find a way out of the difficulty presented by a literal interpretation of *Maryam*, verse 72:

And once again: We shall save (from hell) those who have been conscious of Us.

Islahi wonders why the virtuous need to be saved from hell since there is no danger at all that they would be sent there. He solves the problem by saying that, in this verse, God saves the virtuous from their worries and troubles (*najat dene se murad in tamam humum o afkar aur is tashwish o intizar se najat*, *ibid*, p. 679). Hence, ultimately, Islahi has been forced to accept a more figurative or metaphorical meaning for the reality of hell. The reader is left with the question as to whether the Qur'an understands hell simply as a metaphor.

Former Scriptures

Islahi says (cf. *ibid*, p. 643) that the "divine writ", mentioned in verse 16, refers to the Gospel:

And call to mind, through this divine writ, Mary. Lo! She withdrew from her family to an eastern place.

Since he claims to have dealt with these references in his discussion of Surah *Al 'Imran*, Islahi now limits himself to a clarification simply of the context of these verses (*yahan ham sirf ayat ke siyaq o sabaq ki wazahat ki had tak bahs ko mahdud rakhenge*, *ibid*). Since it is not clear whether the context is the same from one Surah to the next, there is a question about the legitimacy of comparing a verse from one context with that from another. Islahi does not deal adequately with this problem in his use of "parallel verses" in the Qur'an (*quran ke nazair*, p. 663).

Islahi's ambivalent approach to the former Scriptures becomes apparent in that he agrees with the information provided by the Gospels that Bethlehem is the place referred to in verse 22: "she withdrew with him to a far-off place" (cf. *ibid*, p. 645) but he rejects in the present Surah (and in Surah *Al 'Imran* and in Surah *Al Maidah*) what he calls a certain Pauline mythology (cf. *ibid*, p. 648). Islahi also makes a passing remark about the way certain traditions were included in the Gospels to support a particular viewpoint (*jab hazrat masih par da'we aluhiyat ki tuhmat chapkai gayi hai to is ki tayid farahim karne ke liye is qism ki riwayat bhi injilon mein dakhil kar di gayi*, *ibid*, p. 649). But Islahi does not develop these observations about the formation of the Gospels. He only refers to the way traditions came to be

changed and corrupted in the process of transmission (*ba'd ke naskhon se is ka zikr ghaib ho gaya ho*, *ibid*, p. 666). Islahi refers to these changes to explain why he found no satisfactory clarifications about the Prophet *Idris* in Bible history (*bible history mein koi aisi chiz muje nahin mil saki*, *ibid*).

The Way of God

Islahi has a particular way of understanding of “the way of God” (*sun'at-i-ilahi*, *ibid*, p. 680). The Qur'an says that God warns people and tries to raise their awareness by prolonging their lives on earth through an extension of their life span (*in ko ziyadah se ziyadah dhil de ta ke wo apna pemaana achhi tarah bar len aur khuda ki hujjat in par tamam ho jaye*, *ibid*). Islahi tries to clarify this concept of “extension of time” by stressing that it is totally in the power of God to grant such an extension or not (*ya'ni zalimon ko anil khuda ki qudrat, hikmat aur is ki tadbir ka muqtasa hai*, *ibid*). Those who refuse to pay attention to the warnings given by God have to take the consequences of their refusal by experiencing various kinds of agony in this world and in the next (*ye 'anqarib apni is gumrahi ke anjam se duchar honge*, *ibid* p. 667).

But Islahi does not clarify the kind of suffering or punishment that will come in this world as distinct from the punishment one can expect in the next, according to the phrase from verse 75: “suffering (in this world) or (at the coming of) the Last Hour” (*ek se 'azab dunya murad hota hai aur dusre se 'a: ab-i-qayamat*, *ibid*, p. 680). Islahi says the task of the Prophet is simply to convey good news of success and happiness to those who fear God (*jin ke andar khauf-i-khuda hai in ko fauz o falah ki khush khabari suna do*, *ibid*, p. 690). As for the unbelievers, the Prophet is told to warn them of suffering in this world and in the next (*dunya aur akhirat donon ke 'azab se khabardar kar do*, *ibid*). But he does not explain how success and happiness for the virtuous and punishment for the unbelievers will take place in this world except in terms of the conquest of Mecca by the Muslims.

Moreover, Islahi refrains from entering into any discussion of the “bond with the Most Gracious”, mentioned in verse 87, a bond that could provide even great sinners with the hope of forgiveness. Islahi also rejects the possibility of any kind of intercession, in the way the Jews conceived of it (*yahud ki tarah*, *ibid*, p. 685), which this verse seems to grant to the Prophets on judgment day (*quran ki roshni mein is khush fahami ke liye koi gunjaish nahin hai*, *ibid*).

The Image of God

Islahi says the Qur'an presents the correct image of a God who is just, whose mercy does not negate his justice (*is ki rahmat is ki 'adl ko batil nahin karti balke is ka 'adl bhi is ki rahmat hi ka muqtaza hai*, ibid, p. 688). The Qur'anic concept of God's justice corrects the faulty notions prevalent in other religions. Hence, it takes Islahi only one sentence to dismiss the Christian doctrine of atonement (*gunahon ka kafara*, ibid, p. 688). Next, Islahi points out the Jewish error (*yahud ki gumrahi*, ibid), according to which the Jews shelter behind a false concept of the merciful God (*khuda ki rahmaniyat hi ki ar li thiy*, ibid). Finally, Islahi totally rejects the false ideas of the unbelieving Arabs, who rely on various deities to intercede for them with the Almighty.

The justice of God requires that he redress the grievances of those who are afflicted and punish the wrongdoers (*is rahmat ka lazmi taqaza ye hai ke wo haq pariston ki dad rasi kare aur in ki haq parasti ka bar pur sulah de aur zalimon nahanjaron ko jahanam mein jhonk de*, ibid). Islahi concludes that all the warnings as well as the good tidings contained in this Surah are an expression of the mercy of God (*khuda ki sifat rahmaniyat par mabni hai*, ibid, p. 689). Earlier, Islahi had said that the unity of God is so clear that every reasonable person would not hesitate to accept it (*har insan, jis ki fitrat salim ho, is ke manane par muztar hai*, ibid, p. 659). It seems that Islahi would have the same expectation of any reasonable person regarding the image of God who is both just and merciful.

Conclusions

Islahi distinguishes the Surahs of Surah Group Three on the basis of the flow of their arguments and the style of their expressions (*tariq-i-istadlal aur nahj bayan mein farq hai*, ibid, p. 629). Usually, Islahi explains this phrase in terms of the brevity of style in one Surah as compared with the more detailed description to be found in another. Islahi should have given a more adequate explanation of the style of expression since it points to a basic difference between Surahs. It is not satisfactory to refer to brevity of style in one Surah as compared with a more detailed account in another.

Islahi frequently opts for the literal or physical meaning of a word according to which a verse describes an actual event. For instance, the expression of horror in verse 90 must be taken at its face value (*ye koi mubalagha ka uslub-i-bayan nahin hai balke ek haqiqat ka bayan hai*, ibid, p. 686). Moreover, Islahi claims that the language in verse 71 is an expression of a style that has been misunderstood by past commentators. Islahi does not elaborate on this style but refers the reader to a book written by Farahi explaining that particular style (*uslub kalam*, ibid, p. 679). Islahi should have provided the reader with more clarification about this special style of expression.

In this Surah, Islahi uses two further terms to indicate the context of the verses. The first term is: *khas mauqa' o mahal*, which refers to the situation in which this Surah was revealed. Islahi says that the context and background to this Surah is the political alliance between the Quraysh and the People of the Book. In fact, the Surah was revealed during the first four years of the Meccan period when there was no question of a political alliance between the Quraysh and the People of the Book. The Surah was probably revealed as a prelude to the migration of some Muslims to the Christian region of Abyssinia. Islahi portrays the Jews and the Christians in a negative light so that his theory about their political alliance with the Quraysh might appear more plausible. He completely disregards the occasions of revelation (*shan-i-nuzul*) and substitutes concepts that are the product of his own intuitive imagination to describe the context (*khas mauqa' o mahal*).

nazair, ibid, p. 15), Islahi confirms his explanation about the pronouns of verse 16 (cf. ibid). Sometimes, in order to confirm his explanation of a verse, Islahi summarizes a parallel verse in his own words (*ye tafsil ham apne alfaz mein karenge*, ibid, p. 47) instead of simply quoting it in full. He gives no consideration to the different socio-historical contexts of these parallel verses.

Yet Islahi is aware of sociological and political factors influencing the decision of the people in power during the dialogue between Moses and the sorcerers (verses 63-64). Islahi says that those in power were just deceiving the people with their words (*alfaz mein khitaab mahz 'awam faribi ke liye hai*, ibid, p. 63) because Pharaoh's government and civilization consisted merely of an aristocracy who were intent on using the deprived classes of people for their own advantage (*'awam ko apne kisi maqsud ke liye iste'mal karna chahte hain*, ibid). Islahi recognizes the political intrigues going on among the sorcerers in his comment on verse 64, saying that it is the usual practice of political parties to foster antagonism among themselves in order to achieve their own purposes (*jis tarah siyasi partiyon mein bahm raqabate hoti hain*, ibid). For Islahi, such *ideological* and *political* factors are very significant in order to understand the Qur'an.

Verse 65 describes the rules of the contest that is about to begin:

Said (the sorcerers): "O Moses! Either thou throw (thy staff first), or we shall be the first to throw."

Islahi explains the situation from a *psychological* point of view (*is tarah ke muqablon mein taqdim o takhir ko bari ahammiyyat hasil hoti hai. har fariq ki ye khahish hoti hai ke wo apne pahle hi kartab se hazirin ko is tarah mashur kar ke*, ibid, p. 64). Moreover, Islahi mentions aspects of society as it was at that time to explain verse 69, describing the common practice of certain vulgar elements in society (*is peshah ke log hamesha sosaiti ke arazil o anfar se ta'lluq rakhne wale hote hain*, ibid, p. 65). He says that no initiative for the reform of society can be expected from such people (*lekin sosaiti ki ta'mir o islah mein koi kardar in ka na hota*, ibid). Islahi describes the social background of these verses by making observations about society and politics as he understands it at that time.

Furthermore, commenting on verse 70, Islahi calls Pharaoh a shrewd politician who was able to make use of the situation (*surat-i-hal ko sanbhalne ki koshish ki*, ibid, p. 66) and who did not shrink from using deceptive means to dupe the people (*'awam ko bewaquf banane ke liye*

fauran ek neya ashghalah chaura, ibid). Interestingly, Islahi explains the extreme punishment meted out to the sorcerers in verse 71 in terms of the political nature of the crime committed.¹²² The sorcerers had challenged the political authority of Pharaoh's government and so their crime was not simply a religious one but took on a political dimension (*ye masalah mahz din o 'aqidah ka masalah nahin tha balke bilwast is ke iqtidar ko ek chalanj tha*, ibid). Islahi is aware that such a political crime must be dealt with harshly in order to restore the authority of the ruler over his people (*us ne bari siyasi zahanat ka subut dia aur kiya 'ajab ke is tarah wo buhton ko bewaquf banane mein kamyab bhi ho gaya*, p. 67). According to Islahi, those in power used to give exemplary punishment for such political crimes. Islahi recognizes the fact that the punishment meted out to the sorcerers was in accordance with the custom of the times (*jo is zamane mein hukumat ke khilaf sazish karne walon ko di jati thi*, ibid) and was far greater than that meted out by the sorcerers' own leaders (ibid). Islahi also imputes bad motives to the Samaritan, who was the ringleader in the idol worship affair, saying that he had set out to dupe the people (*sadah loh 'awam ko bewaquf banane mein kamyab ho gaya*, p. 76).

The Appeal to Reason

Islahi repeats the statement he has made elsewhere that the message of the Qur'an is confirmed by the abundant evidence within human beings and around them (*quran . . . jo dalail iste'mal karta hai wo bhi afaq o anfus ke wohi dalail hain jo hamare 'aql ke khazane mein maujud hain*, ibid, p. 15). Moreover, the necessity for final accountability is so evident for Islahi that he cannot envisage a rational understanding of the world without it (*agar aisa na ho to ye dunya ek rahim o hakim ki banai hui dunya nahin balke ek khilandarey ka khel ban ke rah jati hai aur ye bat bil badahat khilaf 'aql hai*, ibid, p. 32). Human beings who use their reason can draw the conclusion that God, rather than Pharaoh, is king of the world (*fitrat aur 'aql ki rahnumai hi kafi hai*, ibid, pp. 57-58). However, in his mercy, God has provided humanity with added guidance through his messengers and through the scriptures (cf. ibid). As verse 54 says:

In all this, behold, there are messages indeed for those who are endowed with reason.

¹²² The Qur'an does not say that these punishments were actually carried out. Moreover, it is not clear that the crimes committed by the sorcerers were political in nature. Since the sorcerers were responding in faith to the miracles worked by Moses, it would seem that their behaviour was religiously rather than politically motivated.

For Islahi, this means that the abundant evidence in creation must be obvious to anyone with the faculty of reason (*jo dalile hain wo in logon se makhfi nahin ho sakte jin ke andar 'aql hai aur wo apni 'aql se kam bhi lete hain*, ibid, p. 59).

Islahi compares the account of the childhood of Moses provided in verses 40 of this Surah with the account provided by the second chapter of Exodus in the Bible and finds that the Qur'an accords with reason and nature (*qarin-i-'aql o fitrat hai*, ibid, p. 46) and that the Qur'an is more credible than the Torah (*zahir hai ke quran ki bat ziyadah qarin-i-qiyas hai*, ibid, p. 43). Islahi says that no critical investigation into the difference between these two accounts is needed (*taurat aur quran ke bayan mein jo farq hai is par tabsirah ki zarurat nahin hai*, ibid, p. 46). In another place, Islahi compares what the Qur'an and Torah have to say and concludes that such a comparison brings out the original emphasis of the Qur'an (*quran ke alfaz ka asal maqam o mahal aur is ka asli zaur samajh mein ayega*, ibid, p. 82). Islahi displays a preference for his own unexamined assumptions over an objective analysis of the two texts.¹²³

Islahi appeals to ordinary common sense in order to understand verse 87:

They answered: "We did not break our promise to thee of our own free will, but (this is what happened:) we were loaded with the (sinful) burdens of the (Egyptian) people's ornaments, and so we threw them (into the fire), and likewise did this Samaritan cast (his into it)."

Islahi says that previous commentators had great difficulty with this verse because of its brevity (*ijaz ke sabab se is ke tawil mein hamare mufassarin ko bara iztirab pesh aya hai*, ibid, p. 76). Islahi proceeds to express its meaning in his own words (*ham apne lafzon mein is ka matlab bayan karenge*, ibid, pp. 76-77). This exercise leads him to reject as inconceivable (*bilkul khilaf-i-qiyas*, ibid, p. 77) the popular tradition concerning this verse (*hamare nazdik ye riwayat sahih nahin hai*, ibid) that the jewelry belonged to the Egyptians. Moreover, he notes that the word "threw" has many meanings (*wasi' ma'non mein ata hai*, p. 78) and states the word refers to the performance of a skill (*yahan ye lafz hunar aur kartab dikhane ke ma'ni mein hai*, ibid), which is the same meaning that verse 65 gives to the word (cf. ibid). Islahi has engaged the tradition of commentary (*tafsir*) and drawn his own conclusion based on persuasive arguments.

¹²³ Islahi's failure to examine the account of the childhood of Moses in the Torah results in his baseless conclusion that the account in the Qur'an is more credible than that provided in the Torah.

In this Surah, Islahi also displays his attitude to modern society. He says that rejection of belief in God is the folly of today's world (*inkar-i-khuda ki hamaqat maujuda zamane ki paidawar hai*, ibid, p. 31). He describes the importance of the press in today's world in his reflections on verses 35-36 (cf. ibid, p. 38) but rejects modern propaganda (*maujuda zamane ke shaitani propaganda*, ibid, p. 53) in discussing verse 44. He also makes a reference to the corruption of modern cities (*hamare shahr shahr mein*, ibid, p. 78). These are comments in which Islahi writes as a social commentator rather than as an exegete.

Different Kinds of Expression

Islahi refers to the metaphorical use of the word for "book" in verse 52:

(Moses) answered: "Knowledge thereof rests with my Sustainer (alone, and is laid down) in His decree; my Sustainer does not err, and neither does He forget."

Islahi says the environment of the verses makes it quite clear (*qarina dalil hai*, ibid, p. 58) that the word "decree" in verse 52 does not refer to just any kind of book (*koi ye na samjhe ke ye koi aisi waisi kitab hai*, ibid) even though the verse describes a record (*is ke pas sara rikard mahfuz hai*, ibid) or register (*rajistar*, ibid). Islahi says that the subtle style used in the Surah (*nihayat baligh andaz*, ibid) indicates that the reference is not just to a book but to the "reward and punishment" implied by the book (*hisab o kitab aur jaza o saza ke liye*, ibid, p. 58). He says that there was no need for the Prophet Moses to explain this any further since the subtle style of the Surah made it quite clear (*hazrat musa ne is ka izhar nahin farmaya lekin in ka andaze kalam khud is ko nihayat khubi ke sath zahir kar raha hai*, ibid, pp. 58-59). Islahi adds that occasionally the metaphor speaks for itself and needs no further explanation (*ba'z mauqa' mein kinayah jitna mu'assir hota hai sarahat itni mu'assir nahin hoti*, ibid, p. 59). Islahi has identified a metaphorical style of expression in the Surah.

However, Islahi understands the interview between Moses and Pharaoh as simply a factual, though abbreviated, report (*yahan bat mukhtasar kar di gayi hai*, ibid, p. 61). Islahi states that verses 53-56 and verses 74-76 are interspersed into the dialogue according to a style of speech that is quite different from the style used in the rest of the Surah (*in ka andaz upar ki ayat ke andaz se bilkul mukhtalif hai*, ibid, p. 68). Islahi has no further comment on these changes of style except to say that God inserted these

verses (*wo allah ta'ala hi ke shayani shan hain*, ibid). Islahi does not elaborate on the literary character of the discourse.

Likewise, Islahi refers to the style used in verse 75 (*uslub-i-bayan par ghaur kijiye*, ibid, p. 69) without explaining it any further. He explains the verse by introducing his own parable of a barren tree in order to bring out the meaning more clearly (*ek thunth drakht ke manand hai jo barg-o-bar se bilkul khali hai*, ibid). The stick used by the Prophet Moses to divide the sea is a sign of his power (*ye uslub-i-bayan is ikhtiyar ko zahir karta hai*, ibid, p. 71). In other words, Islahi says that the word “stick” is used metaphorically. Earlier, he had referred to the stick of Moses in terms of an Arabic idiomatic expression (*'arabi muhavarah*, ibid, p. 69) and as a subtle allusion (*ek latif kinayah hazrat musa ke 'asa ki taraf bhi hai*, ibid, p. 70). He also refers to the language used in verse 78 to express the fearfulness of the doom that awaited Pharaoh (*'arabi mein ye uslub-i-bayan kisi chiz ki aisi haulnaki ya 'azmat ke izhar ke liye ata hai*, ibid). However, Islahi does not make similar observations regarding the style of expression used in verses 83-84:

(And God said:) “Now what has caused thee, O Moses, to leave thy people behind in so great a haste?”

He answered: “They are treading in my footsteps while I have hastened unto Thee, O my Sustainer, so that Thou might be well-pleased (with me).”

Islahi describes what is related in these verses simply as “events” (*ye waq'e*, ibid, p. 74).

Transcending the Specific Context

Reflecting at length on the phrase from verse 40:

We tried thee with various trials,

Islahi draws a general conclusion of universal significance (*in imtehanon se muta'lliq ek haqiqat hamesha mustahzar rakhiye ke ye insan ki ta'lim o tarbiyat ka lazimah hain*, ibid, p. 50). Islahi relates these trials to God's usual way of dealing with humanity (*sunnat-i-ilahi*, ibid, p. 51) since everyone will be tested, whoever he may be (*afrad hon ya aqwam, nek hon ya bad, sab ki azmaish har waqt hoti rahti hai*, ibid, p. 75). The idea of testing is a general concept in the light of which (*is roshni mein*) Islahi understands the historical narrative of the Prophet Moses (*imtehanon hi se sabiqah raha*, ibid, p. 50) and, therefore, the life of the last Prophet as well.

Islahi further presumes that the disposition to understand the Qur'an exists in people who preserve the integrity of their natural selves (*ye taqwa aur ye khauf in tamam logon ke andar maujud hota hai jin ki fitrat maskh hone se mahfuz hoti hai*, *ibid*, p. 15) but he does not explain how one is to protect oneself from those things that damage one's integrity (*apni fitrat maskh kar lete hain*, *ibid*). Islahi describes human nature in an abstract way, unrelated to the conditions of the society in which he is living.

Furthermore, Islahi occasionally uses the third person to refer to mankind in general (*is se ye rahnumai milte hai*, *ibid*, p. 40) or to all believers (*mumin ka 'aqidah aur kardar banta hai*, *ibid*, p. 42). He also draws a general lesson from the encounter between the Prophet Moses, Harun and Pharaoh, saying that all people in positions of power tend to act like Pharaoh did (*arbab-i-iqtidar ahl-i-haq ke muqabalah mein hamesha isi tarah ke harbe iste'mal karte rahe hain*, *ibid*, p. 63).¹²⁴ Finally, Islahi outlines a law of accountability that applies across all times and cultures (*jinhone khuda ki ni'maton ka haq ada kiya ho wo is ka silah payen aur jinhone in ni'maton ko khuda ki zamin mein fasad ka zare'a banaya ho wo is ki saza bhugaten*, *ibid*, p. 60). Such a law is demanded by a rational approach to the evidence contained in the universe.

¹²⁴ It is a sweeping generalization to say that all rulers tend to act as Pharaoh did. One example that would provide a very different image of rulers is the protection afforded by the Negus of Abyssinia to the Muslims.

Conclusions

Islahi reads this Surah in the light (*is roshni mein*) of the conflict between the Prophet and the Quraysh. Against this background, the opening verses take on a special meaning and the historical narrative of Moses has the particular purpose of encouraging and preparing the last Prophet (peace be upon him) for his ordeal. Islahi totally disregards the Hadith that says that the Surah was revealed in the early Meccan period and that it led to the conversion of Hazrat Umar. Islahi justifies his reading of the Surah in this particular social context by making frequent use of words like *mauqa' o mahal dalil hai* (ibid, pp. 29-30) and *qarina bilkul wazeh hai* (ibid, p.33). In other words, the *context* leads to the *theme* and the *theme* leads back to the *context* in a circular fashion.

Islahi makes general observations about the oppressive nature of aristocracy and the intrigues common in political parties to explain the encounter between Moses, Pharaoh and the sorcerers. He imputes motives of an ideological, political and psychological nature onto the antagonists in this drama (*jis tarah siyasi partiyon mein bahm raqabite hoti hain*, ibid, p. 63) and refers to the lower classes of society in a demeaning way (*is peshah ke log hamesha sosaiti ke arazil o anfar se ta'lluq rakhne wale hote hain*, ibid, p. 65). He describes Pharaoh as a leader who was ready to dupe his people (*'awam ko bewaquf banane ke liye*, ibid, p. 66) and explains the punishment given to the sorcerers as political in nature (*ye masalah mahz din o 'aqidah ka masalah nahin tha balke bilwast is ke iqtidar ko ek chalanj tha*, ibid). In other words, Islahi describes the social context according to his own assumptions and perceptions about former as well as contemporary conditions in society. His description of the social and the political context is already an interpretation of the Surah.

Besides describing the socio-political background of the verses, Islahi claims that human rationality can demonstrate the logical necessity of accountability on the Last Day. Islahi disagrees with earlier commentators on the Qur'an (*hamare mufassarin*, ibid, p. 76) and appeals to ordinary common sense (*ham apne lafzon mein is ka matlab bayan karenge*, ibid, pp. 76-77) to support his own view and to discredit the popular tradition (*riwayat*) as inconceivable (*bilkul khilaf-i-qiyas*, ibid, p. 77). Islahi also makes comments on modern society (*maujuda zamane*, ibid, p. 53) that rely on his own perceptions and assumptions. Islahi does not acknowledge the

fact that other readers come to the same text with different perceptions and assumptions.

Islahi encourages the reader to take note of the style of expression used in the Surah (*uslub-i-bayan par ghaur kijiye*, ibid, p. 69) and points out how effective the metaphorical reference to God's decree is in verse 52 (*kinayah jitna mu'assir hai*, ibid, p. 59). Though he finds other metaphorical allusions (*ek latif kinayah*, ibid, p. 70) in the Surah, Islahi considers the interview between Moses and Pharaoh to be an abbreviated but factual report (*yahan bat mukhtasar kar di gayi hai*, ibid, p. 61) and the descriptions of Moses' great haste in verses 83-84 as events that happened in a *prima facie* way (*ye waq'e*, ibid, p. 74). Thus, Islahi finds both factual as well as metaphorical expressions in the Surah without explaining the criterion he uses to differentiate between these two kinds of expression.

Finally, Islahi describes human nature in its original, pure form (*jin ki fitrat maskh hone se mahfuz hoti hai*, ibid, p. 15) and posits a universal law of history according to which everyone's endurance will be tested (*imtehanon hi se sabiqah raha*, ibid, p. 50). Moreover, all human beings will be rewarded or punished according to "the way of God" (*sunnat-i-ilahi*, ibid, p. 51). By resorting to these abstract concepts, Islahi abandons the context and conditions of the particular society and culture that had been so significant for him when he explained the meaning of the Surah in terms of the conflict between the Prophet and the Quraysh. In other words, his discourse has shifted from using specific to more abstract concepts, which he claims are to be found in the text of the Qur'an. Islahi moves from one kind of discourse to the other without explaining how they interrelate.

Surah Al Anbiya

Introduction

This Surah begins where the previous Surah left off. The last verse of the previous Surah warned the Quraysh that they would not have to wait long for a visible manifestation of the coming punishment (*nishani 'azab*, vol. 5, p. 115). The present Surah begins with the same warning to the Quraysh, saying that the time for their accountability is at hand (*hisab ki ghari*, *ibid*). But the warning was lost on those to whom it was addressed. The people stuck to their view that the world was simply a place for man's entertainment (*bazecha-i-atfal*) and pleasure (*khel tamasha*, *ibid*). They persisted in their devotion to the idols on which they relied for assistance, paying no attention to the teaching of the Prophets.

Whereas the previous Surah focused on the Prophet Moses, this Surah mentions many other Prophets as well. It also clearly forecasts the imminent triumph of the truth (*ghalba haq*) and the conquest of Mecca (*fatah makka*, *ibid*). The Surah thus expresses a final warning to the Quraysh and good news for the Muslims who were involved in the on-going struggle between truth and falsity (*musalmanon ke liye kashmakash-i-haq o batil*, *ibid*). In the subsequent introductions to the various groups of verses, Islahi usually exhorts the reader to understand a particular group of verses in the light of the introduction he has provided (*is roshni mein ayat ki talawat farmaiye*, *ibid*, p. 130)¹²⁵.

The inner thoughts of the Prophet are presented as a key to understanding verse 4:

Say: "My Sustainer knows whatever is spoken in heaven and on earth; and He alone is all-hearing, all-knowing."

Islahi says the Prophet did not address the unbelievers directly because he knew that they were engaged in idle talk (*ap jante the*, *ibid*, p. 123). Islahi presents the verse as an expression of the Prophet's own faith (*main is mu'amalah ko apne rab hi ke hawalah karta hun*, *ibid*) though he quickly adds that the Qur'an is not a product of the Prophet's own speech but only of God's revelation (*quran ko nabi salla allahu alayhi wa sallam khud apne*

¹²⁵ Islahi frequently uses the same expression: *is roshni mein ayat ki tilawat farmaiye*. See, for example, *ibid*, pp. 144, 153, and 187.

kalam ki haisiyat se nahin balke allah ta'ala ki wahi ki haisiyat se, ibid, p. 124). Islahi stresses that the Qur'an is a revelation from God.

The Social Context

In order to establish the coherence of the Surah, Islahi says that there is a close connection (*halqah ittisal*, ibid, p. 121) between the last verse of the previous Surah and the first verse of the present one. He further establishes the coherence of the Surah by identifying its addressees as the unbelievers of Mecca (*mushrikin makka*, ibid, p. 121). Hence, the "men" mentioned in verse 1 are the Quraysh:

Closer draws unto men their reckoning: and yet they remain stubbornly heedless (of its approach)

Similarly, verse 3 refers to the leaders of the Quraysh (*quraysh ke lidaron aur in ke danishwaron*, ibid, p. 122 and p. 126). Islahi says that the language in which this statement is couched represents a style frequently found in the Qur'an. The phrase from verse 50: "will you, then, disavow it?" is also addressed to the Quraysh (ibid, p. 157).

Islahi describes the social context of verse 3 in terms of the particular assumptions and prejudices of the Quraysh (cf. ibid, pp. 122-123). In a similar way, Islahi describes the background of verse 68 (cf. ibid, p. 164). In his discussion of verses 62-63, which describe the way Abraham answers those who ask him about the destruction of their gods, Islahi highlights the significance of the context for understanding the meaning of a word. Islahi says that Abraham's response is a figure of speech expressing both satire and wisdom (*ek latif tanz, ek pur ma'ni istahza aur ek hakimana istidraj*, ibid, p. 162). Rejecting any possibility of dishonesty on the part of the Prophet Abraham, Islahi says that the correct meaning of a word with several meanings can only be determined from the context (*is ke sahih mafhum ka ta'ayyun is ke siyaq o sabaq se hota hai*, ibid, p. 163). Moreover, the kind of idol worship and wrong behavior that Islahi describes as the context or background for the verses of this Surah emerges from his understanding of Arabic society at the time of revelation.¹²⁶ For Islahi, the verses of the Surah are linked together by the fact that they form part of a coherent narrative.

¹²⁶ Islahi says that similar examples illustrating the importance of the context for the meaning of the Surah are to be found in Surah *Yusuf* (cf. ibid).

Transcending the Specific Context

Islahi attempts to draw more general concepts from the Surah by mentioning the purpose of a verse or group of verses. For instance, in his discussion of verses 72-73, he says that the purpose (*maqsud*) of the narrative about the Prophets is to enable those people to see and evaluate themselves in a new light (*wo is aina mein apne muh dekhne aur apne qul o 'amal ka jaizah len*, *ibid*, p. 166). Furthermore, Islahi often says that we should read the following verses in the light of the consolation (*tasalli*) the Prophet received (cf. *ibid*, p. 144).¹²⁷ In a similar way, Islahi collects verses 48-77 in one section and says that these verses were revealed in order to present a particular truth to those who opposed the Prophet (*mukhalafin ke samne is haqiqat ko wazeh karna hai*, *ibid*, p. 153).

Furthermore, Islahi moves from the particular reference to the Quraysh to a discussion of human beings in general in his discussion of verse 1 (*insan*, *ibid*, p. 122) and to the human heart in his discussion of verse 3 (*dil ka asli kam*, *ibid*). Moreover, Islahi has a universal vision for verses 48-49, saying that the light acts as a universal guidance (*ye tamam zahini o akhlaqi aur fikri o 'amli tarikiyon se nikal kar hidayat*, *ibid*, p. 157). Islahi expresses a similar universal vision for his tenth group of verses (*tamam insaniyat*, *ibid*, p. 169).

Moving beyond the specific context at the time of revelation, Islahi draws a general conclusion by saying the God demands a kind of mixture of "religion and world" (*din o dunya ki yahi baham amizi khuda ko matlub hai*, *ibid*, p. 175). He does the same when he makes a sweeping statement about scientists (*ibid*, p. 176) and refers to the ability of *all rulers* to subdue nature (*ek laiq hukumran ka asli kam yahi hai*, *ibid*, p. 177), adding that it is God who gives them the power to do this. Islahi finds another general warning in verse 82 for all such people as would ascribe the power to subdue natural forces to themselves (*in logon ke liye jo qudrat ki ba'z quwwaton ko taskhir kar ke ye samajh baithe hain ke ab ye in ke malik hain*, *ibid*). The narrative about the Prophet Job also provides Islahi with several general conclusions (*insan ke lie*, *ibid*, p. 179) and (*hamare 'ibadat guzar bandon ke liye*, *ibid*). Similarly, Islahi seems to see the purpose (*maqsud*) of the narrative about the Prophet Jonah to provide *all believers* with an example (*wo apne ba iman bandon ko isi tarah har gham o alam se najat deta hai jis tarah us ne*

¹²⁷ Islahi uses the same general concept of consolation (*tasalli*) on p. 149 and 151.

yunus ko najat di, ibid 184), though it is not so clear that he would include believers who lived after the time of revelation in this category. His discussion of verse 106 leaves the reader with a similar question:

Herein, behold, there is a message for people who (truly) worship God.

Islahi does not elaborate explicitly on how the universal teaching that the verse provides extends to believers who live after the time of revelation (*yahan munadi 'am aur basharat-i-'am donon ke mazmun ka hamil hai*, ibid, p. 199).

The Appeal to Reason

The Qur'an invites a person to consider the abundant evidence available in the environment in a rational way (*quran ke da'wat tamam tar afaq o anfus aur 'aql o fitrat ke dalail par mabni thi*, ibid, p. 125). The Qur'an does not appeal to marvels or miracles or to signs of coming punishment but to the capacity of human intelligence. The natural way to faith is the way of reason (*iman ka fitri rastah 'aql o dil ka rastah hai*, ibid). Islahi stresses that verses 48-49 also appeal to the use of reason (ibid, p. 157).

Islahi invites the reader to consider how the Prophet Abraham presented his argument in his own peculiarly rational way (*hazrat ibrahim alayhi assallam bahs o istadlal mein latif o pakizah tanz se jis tarah kam lete hain isi tarah istidraj bhi hujjat-i-ibrahimi ki ek nihayat numayan khususiyat hai*, p. 160). Islahi also tries to argue that the Prophet Jonah was acting according to reason when he went off in anger, according to verse 87:

And (remember) him of the great fish – when he went off in wrath, thinking that We had no power over him! But then he cried out in the deep darkness (of his distress): “There is no deity save Thee! Limitless art Thou in Thy glory! Verily, I have done wrong!”

Wanting to preserve the Prophet Jonah from the accusation that he acted in anger, Islahi says that the Prophet Jonah's attitude is in keeping with reason (*'aql o fitrat ke bilkul mutabiq bhi hai, is se hazrat yunus par koi ilzam bhi 'aid nahin hota*, ibid, p. 183). Significantly, Islahi admits that he has derived the meaning of this verse from his own understanding of its purpose and not from any further interpretation of the story (*maqsud yahan kissah ki tafsil nahin*, ibid). Islahi sees the purpose (*maqsud*) of the Prophet's crying out from the belly of the fish to show that God is not dependent on the modern media (*kisi public platform ya radio aur television ki zarurat hai*,

ibid, p. 183). In this case, Islahi has referred to the modern reality of the media to throw light on the verse.

Islahi finds another key argument for the coherence of the Surah by showing how it makes a consistent and plausible argument for the necessity for accountability on the Last Day (*muhasabah, yaum alhisab*, ibid, p. 130). As verse 16 says:

And (know that) We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in mere idle play.

If there were no need for accountability, the Creator of the world would simply be someone who plays games and uses the world for his own enjoyment (*khilandarey hai jis ne mahz apni tafrih ke liye ye lela rachai hai*, ibid). Hence, accountability on the Last Day is a logical necessity (*qayamat naguzir hai*, ibid). Similarly, to allow unbelief or idol worship (*shirk*) to go unchecked would allow the world to become a place where people become like children who play games (*ye dunya bazicha-i-atfal aur ek khel tamasha*, ibid) without having to give any consideration to the outcome of their pastimes.

As a logical consequence of the need for final accountability, Islahi stresses the need for reward and punishment (*upar jo bat jaza o saza ke lazmi hone se muta'alliq firmai gayi hai ye is ki dalil bayan hui hai ke agar is dunya ke pichhe koi roz-i-jaza o saza nahin hai . . . to is ke ma'ni ye hue ke us ne ye mahz apna ji bahlane ke liye ek khel tamasha banaya hai*, ibid, pp. 132-133) and asserts that the rationale for the divine nature of accountability needs no further clarification (*upar ki ayat mein jaza-o-saza ke wajib hone par sifat-i-ilahi se istadlal tha*, ibid, p. 134). While admitting that his conclusions are based on his own perception (*hamare nazdik*, ibid), Islahi proceeds to find the same message of "reward and punishment" in the first twenty-nine verses of the Surah. In all these verses, Islahi depends on his understanding of the Arabic practice by which idols have the power to change the final judgment of God regarding human behavior (ibid. pp. 138-139).

People who commit *shirk* believe that forces other than God will come to their aid to defend and even to justify their wrong behavior on the Last Day. Islahi interprets verse 108, which is an invitation to surrender to the one God, as a verse denying that any kind of forces could have the ability to save people from God's wrath (*koi dusra tumhein khuda ki pakar se na bacha sakega*, ibid, p. 199). To acknowledge the ability of such forces would render the idea of final accountability null and void (*qayamat ka hona na*

hona donon yaksa hua, ibid, p. 130). His rational criticism of these Arabic practices dominates his entire discussion of these verses.¹²⁸

Finally, Islahi simply dismisses Hindu philosophers since they do not deal adequately with the issue of accountability (*hindu falasafiyon ne is ko bhagwan ki lela se ta'bir kiya*, ibid, p. 133). He also says that contemporary atheists (*hamare is zamane ke munkirin o malahidah*) do not accept final accountability (*inkar-i-qayamat*) and that such an attitude results in reducing the world to an idle pastime (*bazicha-i-afsal*, ibid).

Different Kinds of Language

At other times, Islahi prefers to neglect the social background of a passage from the Surah, basing his understanding on a literal or *prima facie* analysis of the language. For example, he understands verse 69:

(But) We said: "O fire! Be thou cool, and (a source of) inner peace for Abraham!"

as the expression of a direct intervention by God.¹²⁹ Similarly, Islahi understands the story of the Prophet Noah to be an actual event in history (*ye ek amar-i-waqi'ah hai*, ibid, p. 168). Moreover, the statement in verse 79:

And we caused the mountains to join David in extolling Our limitless glory, and likewise the birds,

is not considered by Islahi to be a poetical use of words but a factual one (*ye na khayal farmaiye ke ye mahz sha'rana khayal arai hai balke ye ek haqiqat hai*, ibid, p. 174).

Islahi follows the earlier interpreters by understanding the reference to garments (*labusin*) in verse 80, as a reference to chain mail:

And We taught him how to make garments.

According to Islahi, history proves that chain mail was actually invented by the Prophet David (*tarikh se sabit hai ke . . . hazrat daud ne ijad ki*, ibid, p. 174), just as it was the Prophet Solomon who invented the sailing ship that could reach India (*tarikhon se ma'lum hota hai ke . . . unhone aisey badbani jahaz ijad kiye jo hindustan aur maghribi jazair tak safar karte they*, ibid, p. 175). Islahi omits to mention that the Qur'an makes these references to

¹²⁸ Verse 107 states that God's purpose is not to punish but to bestow his grace ('*azab bana kar nahin bheja hai*, ibid, p. 199). Islahi discusses the tension between God's justice and God's mercy in Surah *Maryam*. See the last section of my discussion of Islahi's commentary on that Surah.

¹²⁹ Muhammad Asad prefers to understand the verse as an "allegorical allusion to the fire of persecution which Abraham had to suffer". Asad (1980), p. 496, footnote 64.

various inventions as an illustration of the need to adapt to changing needs and circumstances as the Prophets did.

The “stormy wind” mentioned in verse 81, is understood to be directly subservient to the Prophet Solomon (*ham ne sulaiman ke liye tund hawain musakhhar kar di thiy jo is ke hukm se chalti thiy*, *ibid*). Similarly, the “rebellious forces” of verse 82 (“*shayatin*”) are also made subservient to the same Prophet. Islahi goes so far as to say that any good ruler must have the ability to subdue such forces (*ek laiq hukumran ka asli kam yahi hai*, *ibid*, p. 177), thereby drawing a universal application in the area of human governance from a particular verse that deals with God’s power and glory manifested in the life of Solomon (*in ke asli nagran ham they*, *ibid*).¹³⁰ In contrast, Islahi hints that verse 104 uses a figure of speech:

On that Day We shall roll up the skies as written scrolls are rolled up. Islahi discusses this verse by making use of a comparison or a simile (*jis tarah . . . jis tarah*, *ibid*, p. 194). Islahi interprets most of these words in a *prima facie* way but sometimes he accepts a figurative or metaphorical way of interpretation.

On the one hand, for example, he recognizes the words of verse 15:

We caused them to become (like) a field mown down, still and silent as ashes,
to be a metaphorical expression (*iste 'are*, *ibid*) commonly used in Arabic, yet, on the other hand, he understands the reference to the world (*al ard*) in verse 44:

Have they never yet seen how We visit the earth (with Our punishment), gradually depriving it of all that is best thereon?
to be indicating the very specific area of Mecca (“*al ard*” *se murad yahan sar zamin makka hai*”, *ibid*, p. 150). Islahi claims to find an identical reference or parallel verse in Surah *Ar R'ad*, verse 41, understanding all these verses to be an historical reference to the gradual conquest of Mecca by Islam (*islam ke isi tadriji ghalbah*, *ibid*, p. 151).¹³¹

Islahi says that judgment (*'azab*) will occur in this world and in the next (*ibid*, p. 148). In a similar way, Islahi says that success and prosperity has

¹³⁰ Islahi has already discussed this power to subdue natural forces, which was bestowed on the Prophet Solomon, in his discussion of verse 102 of Surah *Al Baqarah*.

¹³¹ Shah Wali Ullah has a very similar interpretation of the term *al ard*, saying that it is a metaphorical expression for the expanding influence of Islam. Cf. his Persian translation of the Qur'an: *Fath Ur Rahman*.

been promised to believers in this world and in the next. Accordingly, the word "grace" in verse 75:

Whereas him We admitted unto Our grace: for, behold, he was among the righteous,

refers to prosperity in this world and in the next ('*rahmat*' *se murad wo najat o falah bhi hai jo is dunya mein in ko hasil hui aur wo kamyabi o kamrani bhi jo akhirat mein in ko hasil hogi*, *ibid*, p. 167).

In contrast, however, Islahi says that the statement in verse 105:

My righteous servants shall inherit the earth
cannot be a reference to the present world (*zahir hai ke ye abdi warasat ki basharat is zamin se muta'alliq nahin hai jis par ham aur ap abad hain*, *ibid*, p. 195). The phrase can only refer to the way God's righteous servants will inherit a new earth in a future world (*zamin se murad is jahan-i-nau ki zamin se jo qayamat ke ba'd wajud mein ayegi aur jis ke malik o waris bila sharkat ghaire sirf allah ke nekar bande honge*, *ibid*, p. 199). At the same time, Islahi has no hesitation in saying that verse 41 from Surah *Al Hajj* refers to the success and prosperity which is the consequence of the conquest of Mecca:

(Well aware of) those who, (even) if We firmly establish them on earth, remain constant in prayer, and give in charity, and enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong; but with God rests the final outcome of all events.¹³²

Islahi presents a confusing picture of success and prosperity in this world.

Links between the Verses

Islahi finds further evidence of the coherence of the Qur'an by discovering thematic links between verses in different places throughout the Surah. For example, Islahi sees a connection between the first words of the Surah:

Closer draws unto men their reckoning
with similar words found in verse 97 of the Surah:

the while the true promise (of resurrection) draws close (to its fulfillment).

Islahi says that this verse deals with the same topic as the first verse (*yahi mazmun is surah ki pahli ayat mein bhi guzar chukka hai*, *ibid*, p. 191). According to Islahi, such a connection between verses is a direct indication of the coherence of the Surah (*is tarah quran apne nazm ki taraf khud*

¹³² Islahi says that similar references to the conquest of Mecca occur in verse 41 of Surah *Ar R'ad* and in verse 44 of Surah *Al Anbiya* (cf. *ibid*, p. 258).

rahnumai kar deta hai, ibid, p. 187). Islahi says that Farahi, his teacher, discovered this way of linking similar verses in the Qur'an (ibid).

Islahi also makes uses of parallel verses as a way of confirming his understanding of the text¹³³. Although he acknowledges that a verse or group of verses has its own particular context in each case (*lekin is ka ek khas mahal hai*, ibid, p. 143), Islahi does not investigate how the different contexts of each verse impact on their interpretation. He demonstrates the same general approach by his general reference to *shirk* as if to say that the term can be used to describe contexts quite different from the specific context of the Quraysh (*jo log kisi shirk mein muhtala hote hain*, ibid, p. 148). Since Islahi does not provide examples of different kinds of *shirk*, he implies that *shirk* is basically of one kind only.

The Way of God

Another concept that helps Islahi to establish the coherence of the Surah is that of "the way of God" (*sunnat allah*), which includes the notion of the completion of the arguments (*itmam-i-hujjat*, ibid, p. 122). Islahi uses these concepts to explain the consequences of the persistently negative response of the Quraysh. Consequently, Islahi can say that the "divine writ" mentioned in verse 10, refers to the way God made his arguments abundantly clear to the Quraysh (*khuda ki jo sunnat aj tak jari rahi hai*, ibid, p. 128) as he did before through the earlier Prophets (*hujjat tamam*, ibid, p. 127). Islahi says that verse 95, which describes the way God destroyed previous peoples because of their stubbornness, applies to the Quraysh and instructs the Prophet not to be over concerned at their refusal to believe. The time of God's punishment has now come (*ab ye log sunnat ilahi ki zid mein a chuke hain*, ibid, p. 190).

Moreover, verse 87 throws further light on the concept of "the way of God" by interpreting the verse to be telling the Prophet Jonah that only God can decide when the time has come to give up all hope for the conversion of a nation and to leave them to their punishment (*sirf khuda hi janta hai ke kab kisi qaum ka paimana labrez hota hai*, ibid, p. 180). Similarly, the Prophets waited for God to reveal the right time for migration (*hijrat*) and understood this as "the way of God" (*hazrat anbiya ke liye hamesha ye sunnat ilahi rahi*

¹³³ For example, cf. ibid, p. 127, 129, and pp. 142-143.

hai, *ibid*). Thus, Islahi uses the concept of “the way of God” to focus on the Prophet and the Quraysh according to the theme (*‘umud*) of the Surah.

Conclusions

Islahi wants the verses of the Surah to be read in the light (*is roshni mein*) of the separate introduction that he provides for each group of verses. This introduction prepares the reader to understand the verses according to the theme (*'umud*) that Islahi has formulated. On this basis, Islahi establishes that the addressees of the Surah are the leaders of the Quraysh. Moreover, he demonstrates the coherence of the Surah by referring to a link (*halqah ittisal*, *ibid*, p. 121) between this Surah and the previous one. He concludes that the Surah is thematically and structurally coherent.

Islahi highlights the social and the cultural background of the Surah, stressing that an understanding the verses must be based on the practice of Arabic society at the time of revelation (*is ke sahih mafhum ka ta'ayyun is ke siyaq o sabaq se hota hai*, *ibid*, p. 163). Islahi also allows the historical background to provide useful information. For example, verse 80 is an actual reference to chain mail invented by the Prophet David and verse 81 describes the sailing ship invented by the Prophet Solomon. By saying that the times have changed (*ab zamana bahut badal chuka hai*, *ibid*, p. 175), Islahi indicates that some verses in the Surah express historical realities that are no longer significant today. But Islahi fails to bring out the main point of these inventions mentioned in the Qur'an, which is to affirm that the Prophets were able to adapt themselves to the changing needs of the time. In other words, he has not paid any attention to the universal meaning of these verses.

Islahi says that the language of the Qur'an is sometimes *factual* and sometimes *metaphorical*. For example, the language about the fire in verse 69 and about the mountains and the birds in verse 79 is *factual* and not poetical (*ye ek haqiqat hai*, *ibid*, p. 174). Similarly, according to Islahi, verse 82 implies that any good ruler (*ek laiq hukumran*) must have the ability to subdue nature. At other times, Islahi says that the language of the Surah uses a figure of speech. For instance, Abraham's response to those who ask him about the destruction of their gods in verses 62-63 is couched in figurative language (*ek latif tanz, ek par ma'ni istahza aur ek hakimana istidraj*, *ibid*, p. 162). Islahi does not provide the reader of the Qur'an with the guidance he needs to distinguish between factual and metaphorical language.

Moreover, Islahi is ambiguous as to how success and prosperity occur both in this world and in the next. By giving a material connotation to the word for “the earth” (*al ard*)¹³⁴ in verse 44, Islahi says that the verse refers to the physical victory by the Muslims over Mecca. Even although he claims that success and prosperity is an experience in this world and in the next, Islahi cannot understand the reference to “inheriting the earth” in verse 105 as referring to the present world (cf. *ibid*, p. 195):

My righteous servants shall inherit the earth.

It seems clear, however, that this phrase promises that those *competent* to govern will exercise power in this world. Since Islahi understands the words “righteous servants” as a reference to pious servants in a religious sense, he fails to understand how the verse can have any bearing on the present world. For pious Muslims do not rule the world.

Islahi rejects the story of the field in verses 78-79 as one example of the hypotheses (*mafruzat*) introduced by earlier commentators on the Qur’an because such hypotheses are external to the Qur’an (*quran se ek bilkul kharij chiz hai*, *ibid*, p. 173).¹³⁵ On the other hand, Islahi draws on information from Arabic traditions regarding the worship of idols to elaborate on the background of this Surah. In fact, he frequently includes material about Arab customs to understand the meaning of a verse. Moreover, in Surah *Al Ahzab*, he makes many references to books of traditions and to historical accounts.¹³⁶

Finally, Islahi argues that the Surah is a thematically coherent narrative because of the many parallel verses and the links that exist between the verses of the Surah. One pre-requisite of this approach, which he attributes to his teacher, Maulana Farahi, is that a concept like *shirk* has the same meaning in every context, culture or period. Likewise, the abstract ideas of *itmam-i-hujjat* and *sunnat-i-ilahi* apply in all circumstances. I detect an inconsistency in Islahi’s approach between his attention to the particular context of a Surah, even saying that each verse has its own specific context (*is ka ek khas mahal hai*, *ibid*, p. 143) and his use of abstract concepts that completely disregard this specific context.

¹³⁴ Islahi finds a similar reference to the victory of the Muslims in Mecca in verse 41 of Surah *Ar Rad* and in verse 60 of Surah *Al Isra*.

¹³⁵ Muhammad Asad says that the story or legend of the field was “well-established in ancient Arabian tradition”. Asad (1980), pp. 496-497, footnote, 70.

¹³⁶ I have referred to these traditions (*riwayat se ma’lum hota hai*, vol. 6, p. 212) and historical accounts (*tarikhon se ma’lum hota hai*, vol. 6, p. 211) in my discussion of Surah *Al Ahzab*.

Surah Al Hajj

Introduction

Islahi situates this Surah in the period when the Muslim believers had almost reached the full extent of their subjugation and oppression by the unbelieving Quraysh, thereby provoking their exodus or migration from Mecca. The Prophet's own migration was imminent (*hijrat ka waqt bilkul qarib a chukka tha*, vol. 5, p. 203). The Surah makes a final appeal to the Quraysh to believe in the oneness of God and in the coming Day of Reckoning. The Quraysh are also reminded how the Prophet Abraham had already made it plain that the construction of the House of Prayer would be entrusted, not to the Quraysh but to Muslim believers, who had been barred from entry (*bait allah ke maqsud ta'mir ki roshni mein in par ye haqiqat wazeh ki gayi ke is ghar ki tuliat ke asal haqdar mushrikin nahin balke wo musalman hain jin ko unhone is se mahrum kar rakha hai*, *ibid*). Islahi says that the conquest of Mecca had already been alluded to in verse 44 of the previous Surah and that it is referred to categorically in this Surah (*bilkul qat'i faislah ki surat*, *ibid*). While the Quraysh are told in no uncertain terms that they will be excluded from the House of Prayer, the Muslims are given the good news that they will be entrusted with its guardianship (*is ka amin o mutawalli banayega*, *ibid*). Islahi interprets the Surah in the light of this basic antagonism between the Quraysh and the Muslims. The former are described as usurpers (*quraysh ka khana ka'ba par tasallut bilkul ghasabana hai*, *ibid*) and the latter are given permission to use the sword to defend themselves (*talwar uthane ka haq*, *ibid*) because the rightful keepers of the House of Prayer are the Muslims (*is ki tuliat ke asli haqdar musalman hain na ke quraysh*, *ibid*).

The Socio-Political Context

Islahi explains verse 17 on the basis of the specific context at the time of revelation:

Verily, as for those who have attained to faith (in this divine writ), and those who follow the Jewish faith, and the *Sabians*, and the Christians, and the *Magians*, (on the one hand,) and those who are bent on ascribing divinity to aught but God, (on the other,) verily, God will decide between them on Resurrection Day: for, behold, God is witness unto everything,

Islahi argues that the verse is an expression of the conflict that existed between the Muslims and the Quraysh (*ye munazara ke asli fariq to musalman aur mushrikin quraysh hi they*, *ibid*, p. 228). Islahi states that the main conflict was between the believers (*ahl iman*) and the unbelievers (*mushrikin*), which in verse 17 includes the Jews, the *Sabians*, the Christians and the *Magians* (cf. *ibid*). Moreover, Islahi sees a link between verse 17 and the sentence in verse 19:

These two contrary kinds of man have become engrossed in contention about their Sustainer!"

Islahi argues that this sentence confirms the existence of a conflict between two factions (*asl fariq do hain*, *ibid*). It is remarkable that Islahi includes the Jews in one group together with the unbelievers (*is maidan mein ek taraf musalman they dusri taraf mushrikin aur yahud*, *ibid*).

Furthermore, Islahi finds a thematic link between verse 17 of this Surah and verse 62 of Surah *Al Baqarah*. Both verses refer to the faith of other groups like the Jews, the *Sabians*, the Christians and the *Magians*. While verse 17 simply says: "God will decide between them on Resurrection Day" (cf. the similar phrase in verse 69), Islahi says the verse points to a conflict between the various groups mentioned in these verses and he concludes that the passage of time results in the corruption of former religions (*imtidad-i-zamanah se har din ka huliya bigra*, *ibid*, p. 227). Moreover, Islahi says that the Jews changed the account of history (*tarikh ki is sar guzasht*, *ibid*, p. 241) from that contained in the Qur'an (*unhone hazrat ibrahim ki ek man gairat tarikh banai*, *ibid*), thereby showing that the corruption of the former Scriptures (*tahrif*, *ibid*) was the result of a different version of history. For example, the Jews claim that "the Most Ancient Temple", referred to in verse 29, was built by the Prophet Solomon and not by the Prophet Abraham (*hazrat sulaiman alayhi assallam ke hathon ta'mir hua hai*, *ibid*, p. 245).

Islahi is even more explicit about the nature of the conflict between two groups in his discussion of verses 19-22, saying that the Jews, the Christians, the *Sabians*, the *Magians* and the unbelievers (*mushrikin*) are all different factions united in their common rejection of Islam (*islam ki mukhalafat mein*, *ibid*, p. 231). Islahi seems to polarize the situation by grouping all these factions together into one party and by setting them up against the Muslims (*sab ko ek hi parti qarar dia aur in ke muqabil mein musalmanon ko ek mustaqil parti ki haisiyat di*, *ibid*, p. 232). Islahi finds confirmation of this reading of the Surah (in terms of the conflict between two parties) in verse 3:

And yet, among men there is many a one who argues about God without having any knowledge (of Him), and follows every rebellious satanic force.¹³⁷

Islahi says that the People of the Book definitely sided with the Arab unbelievers (ibid).

Islahi also finds a thematic link between verse 67 of the present Surah:

Unto every community have We appointed (different) ways of worship, which they ought to observe

and verse 148 of Surah *Al Baqarah* and verse 48 of Surah *Al Maidah*. Islahi understands all these verses as expressions of protest that were made against different groups and not as an invitation to be tolerant of them (*ye yahud o nisara ke sath rawadari ki hidayat nahin hai*, ibid, p. 283). In other words, these verses should be understood according to the specific context of their time.

Islahi realizes that it was not easy for the Quraysh, who enjoyed a pre-eminent position in the whole area (*quraysh ko sirf makka hi mein siyadat o imarat hasil nahin they balke . . . pure 'arab par in ki mazhabi peshwai ki dhak baiti hui thi*, ibid, p. 234), to give up all the advantages accruing to them on account of their religious and socio-political pre-eminence. Hence, they were eager to keep the Muslims at bay (*unhone musalmanon ko haram ki hazri se bhi mahrum kar dia*, ibid). Islahi says that verses 25-37 were revealed in these conditions (*in halat mein ye ayat utri*, ibid) and were meant to function as a mirror for the Quraysh (*ye goya ek aina hai jo quraysh ke samne rakh dia gaya*, ibid, p. 235) while providing encouragement for the Muslims (*musalmanon ki is mein hauslah afzai bhi farmai gayi hai*, ibid). The passage must be read in this light (*is roshni mein*, ibid). Islahi proceeds to do precisely that by interpreting all the instructions about the rites of pilgrimage in these verses as a direct rebuttal of the unnecessary practices instituted by the Quraysh (*mushrikin ne hazrat ibrahim ki tamam muqaddas riwayat apne dunwi mafadat ki khatir bilkul badal dal dia*, ibid, p. 245).¹³⁸ Islahi also refers to the false propaganda spread by the Jews (*islam ke khilaf fitnah angezi aur waswasah andazi ka zariyah banaya. unhone ye propaganda karna sharu' kar dia*, ibid, p. 249).

¹³⁷ The wording of verse 8 differs only slightly: "And yet, among men there is many a one that argues about God without having any knowledge (of Him), without any guidance, and without any light-giving revelation."

¹³⁸ The Quraysh did not change the rites of pilgrimage for their own benefit, however. They made only a few small changes – such as not proceeding to Mount Arafat with the other pilgrims.

Islahi groups verses 37-41 together because they are an expression of the new situation of the Muslims in Medina and of their right to become the custodians of the House of Prayer since the Quraysh had forfeited this right by neglect and misuse. The Quraysh and the People of the Book both used the Muslims' readiness for war as a reason for the propaganda they brought against them (*quraysh aur in ke halif – ahl kitab – is chiz ko bhi islam aur musalmanon ke khilaf propaganda ka zare'a banate*, ibid, p. 252). Islahi says that verse 38 acts as an introduction for this group of verses (*tamhid*, ibid, p. 254) and that the phrase from this verse:

God does not love anyone who betrays his trust and is bereft of gratitude

points directly to the way the Quraysh betrayed their responsibility to supervise the House of Prayer (*in ko haram ki pasbani sapard hui thi*, ibid) by controlling it for their own advantage (*is ghar par apni ajaradari qaim kar ke*, ibid). Now the time has come for the House of Prayer to be taken from those unworthy of it and to be restored to its rightful custodians (*ab waqt a gaya hai ke khuda apne haram ko in napakon se pak kare aur apne in bandon ko is ki tauliat sapard kare jo is ibrahimi amanat ka haqdar ada karen*, ibid).

Hence, the conflict between truth and falsity (*kashmakash haq o batil*, ibid, p. 211) arose in a particular situation in which the opponents of the Prophet began to notice the growing strength of Islam (*islam ki barhti hui taqat ko dekh kar*, ibid, p. 210). Islahi explains verse 52 in terms of the struggle between truth and falsity (*haq o batil mein ye kashmakash*, ibid, p. 269) and verse 53 in terms of the opposition coming from the Quraysh and the Jews (*quraysh aur yahud*, ibid, p. 271). He has a similar explanation for verse 58 (*kuffar-i-quraysh ke zulm o satm*, ibid, p. 278). Furthermore, Islahi interprets verse 60 in terms of the oppression Muslims were experiencing at that time (*mazlum musalman*, ibid, p. 249) and during the period of migration (*hijrat ke waqt*, ibid, p. 250). Islahi ends with a general piece of advice for all Muslims, telling them that they should manifest the qualities of God in their lives (*tumhara rab apni sifat ka 'aks tumhare andar bhi dekhna chahta hai*, ibid), thereby moving beyond the specific context of the time.

Transcending the Specific Context

Islahi says that the phrase from verse 11:

And there is, too, among men many a one who worships God on the border-line (of faith)

describes foolish people in general (*ye ahmaq log*, *ibid*, p. 222),¹³⁹ though he is probably referring to people living at the time of revelation. He also makes a general criticism of the commonly held attitude of negligence with regard to the Qur'an (cf. *ibid*). Similarly, Islahi says that verses 14-15 refer to the reward given to people in general (*in logon ke anjam*, *ibid*, p. 224) whom he later gives a particular designation as Muslims (*is mein musalmanon ke liye taqat o basharat hai*, *ibid*, p. 225). Again, the phrase from verse 18: "And many human beings" refers, in a general way, to all mankind (*insan . . . wo ashraf al-makhluqat aur khalifatah allah fil ard hote hue*, *ibid*, p. 230). Islahi goes on to explain the phrase in terms of all people (*insan ka asli sharf tauhid hai*, *ibid*, p. 231) and as an expression of the universal truth contained in the verse (*haqiqat*, *ibid*).

However, Islahi identifies the Quraysh as those to whom verses 25-26 specifically refer (*ye isharah quraysh ki taraf hai*, *ibid*, p. 238) for it is the Quraysh who have misused the House of Prayer (*ab is ko quraysh ne kiya bana kar rakh dia*, *ibid*, p. 242).¹⁴⁰ Similarly, verse 27 refers to the Quraysh (*is mein bhi quraysh ke riwayat par ta'riz hai*, *ibid*). Similarly, Islahi understands verses 61-62 in terms of the corruption spread by those opposed to the Prophet at that time (*jo is ki dunya mein fasad barpa kar rahe hain*, p. 280). Yet the next verse is interpreted in a more general way (*koi maujudah zahiri halat*, *ibid*, p. 281). Moreover, the last word of verse 66 refers to "man" in general but Islahi says it is directed to all those who opposed the Prophet (*inhi mukhalafin ki taraf hai*, *ibid*, p. 282), according to a special Qur'anic style. Likewise, verse 70 is addressed to the Prophet but Islahi says it is directed to his opponents (*is ka rukh tamam tar mukhalafin ki taraf hai*, *ibid*, p. 284).

Islahi also draws a general conclusion about the proper balance between religion and the world (*din o dunya ki bahm amizi ka e'tidal*, *ibid*, p. 243) from verse 28, which allows the believers to eat of the meat of their sacrifices. The question remains as to whether Islahi moves beyond the specific context of the verse in this commentary or whether his observation on this verse refers to the time of revelation.

¹³⁹ Islahi makes a similar reference to foolish people on the next page (cf. *ibid*, p. 223).

¹⁴⁰ Actually, the Quraysh assisted the pilgrims in all sorts of practical ways. Consequently, verses 25-26 do not refer to the behaviour of the Quraysh but to others who profaned the House of Prayer.

The responsibility for *jihad* is another topic about which Islahi's remarks sometimes move beyond the specific context to encompass all Muslims. Islahi expressly states that permission to engage in *jihad* is given also to Muslims today under certain conditions (*isi tarah aj musalmanon ko bhi ye ijazat di ja rahi hai*, *ibid*, pp. 256-57). Islahi frequently refers to the fact that the Prophet Abraham prayed that his descendants would preserve the sanctity of the House of Prayer. He assumed that the Muslims would accomplish this as soon as they were settled around the House of Prayer (*agar ham apne in bandon ko . . . iqtidar bakhshenge to ye is ke tamam maqasad ko azre nau barwe kar layenge*, *ibid*, p. 258).¹⁴¹ He also says that verse 41 proclaims the good news to the Muslims that they will soon be established in power (*dunya mein musalmanon ke iqtidar o tamakan ki pahli basharat yahi hai*, *ibid*), beginning with the House of Prayer, the heart of the Muslim community (*millet*). It is the duty of all Muslim communities to pay heed to their responsibility for reform (*ba'inah yahi farizah musalmanon par har is sar zamin ke liye 'aid hota hai jahan allah ta'ala in ko iqtidar bakhsha*, *ibid*). Islahi makes it the universal right of every Muslim to defend the House of Prayer from usurpation by unbelievers, even by performing *jihad* if need be (*tamam dunya ke musalmanon par jihad farz ho jayega*, *ibid*, p. 240).

Islahi also makes all-encompassing remarks about Islam. The Prophet Abraham had prayed that *islam*, which is a quality belonging to *all creation* (*islam to tamam kainat ki fitrat hai*, *ibid*, p. 289), would be a name given to the Muslims as a group (*us ka nam unhone pahli hi se umat-i-muslimah rakha tha*, *ibid*). Hence, God gave the Muslims this name as soon as they appeared (*jab is umat ka zahur hua*, *ibid*).¹⁴² Islahi tells all Muslims to keep this history constantly in mind (*apni is tarikh ko barabar yad rakho*, *ibid*).

The Prophet Abraham's sacrifice is an example of *islam* (*islam ki is haqiqat ka izhar farmaya ke muslim ko har waqt apni 'aziz se 'aziz she apne rab ki khatir qurban karne ke liye taiyar rahna chahiye*, *ibid*, p. 247). Islahi refers to the true *muslim* in the same way (*haqiqi mumin o muslim hai*, *ibid*, p. 248). Moreover, *Islam* and *taqwa* are connected in meaning in the same way

¹⁴¹ It is misleading to say that the Muslims would accomplish *jihad* as soon as they were settled around the House of Prayer. Since *jihad* is the struggle against injustice and oppression, it is not focused on Mecca but takes place wherever there is a need.

¹⁴² In fact, the followers of the earlier Prophets from the time of Abraham were already called by the name *muslim*. Cf. verse 78 of the present Surah:

It is He who has named you – in bygone times as well as in this (divine writ) – “those who have surrendered themselves to God”.

as *Islam* and *ikhbat* (ibid, p. 251). Finally, the purpose of Satan's efforts is to free people, in general, from rote imitation (*taqlidi taur par na ikhtiyar kare*, p. 272).

In its final verses, Islahi says the Surah returns to the specific context of the Muslims living at the time of revelation by mentioning the mandate (*mansub-i-imamat*, ibid, p. 287) given to them in order to guard the House of Prayer. Islahi interprets the phrase "it is He who has elected you" of verse 78 as a statement regarding the election of the Muslims for this purpose and the deposition of the Quraysh and the Jews (*dusron ko khwa quraysh ho ya yahud, ma'zul kar ke intikhab kiya*, ibid, p. 288). This brings out the meaning of the election (*ye is intikhab ka maqsud bayān hua hai ke allah ne tumhara intikhab sab ko ma'zul kar ke*, ibid, p. 289) and Islahi finds a connection between this verse and verse 143 of Surah *Al Baqarah*, in which the Muslims are told to give witness to the true *din* (*allah ke din ki gawahi dene wale bano*, ibid).

Islahi refers to other verses in the Qur'an (*quran ke nazair*, ibid, p. 218) to confirm his understanding of this Surah. He does not consider it necessary for further investigation into the specific context of these parallel verses.¹⁴³ Islahi illustrates the fact that a verse can have many meanings by referring to the many meanings of verse 34 (*mukhtalif ma'ni*, ibid, p. 248). Furthermore, since Islahi applies the word for "earth" (*al ard*) in verse 41 of this Surah to the area around Mecca, he finds a parallel between this verse and verse 41 of Surah *Ar R'ad* and to verse 44 of Surah *Al Anbiya* (cf. ibid, p. 258). Islahi finds this concept referred to again in the phrase from verse 77 of the present Surah: "so that you may attain to a happy state!" He says these words allude to the place the believers can expect to find (*is se is tumakan fil ard ki salahiyat bhi tumhare andar ubaregi*, ibid, p. 288).

Different Kinds of Language

Islahi views the phrase from verse 15: "let him reach out unto heaven" as an example of a metaphor (*ek iste'arah hai*, ibid, p.225) and says that such metaphorical expressions occur also in the Urdu language (ibid). Verse 18 describes how all things and beings prostrate themselves before God. Islahi elucidates this further by describing in detail how the sun, moon, stars,

¹⁴³ For further examples of parallel verses in this Surah, cf. ibid, p. 220, p. 226, pp. 229-230, p. 233, p. 242, p. 270 and p. 283.

mountains and animals actually perform the prostrations (*apne rab ke age qiyam, ruku' aur sajde mein hain*, *ibid*, p. 229). Even the shade has a lesson for us in this regard (*ibid*). These observations seem to indicate Islahi's acceptance of figurative language in the Qur'an since it is clear that nature can only perform such prostrations in a figurative way. Islahi is aware that the way human beings prostrate themselves before God is distinct from the way other creatures do this. He quotes verse 15 of Surah *Ar R'ad* and verses 48-49 of Surah *An Nahl* to illustrate the difference between the worship of God by inanimate objects (*be iradah ashiya*) and the worship of God performed by human beings (*apne ikhtiyar o irade ko allah hi ke amr o hukm ke tabe' kar dia hai*, *ibid*, p. 230). The two different kinds of worship can be related to each other by means of a comparison or a simile (*jis tarah . . . isi tarah*, *ibid*).

However, Islahi describes the punishment meted out to those who are bent on denying the truth (cf. *ibid*, p. 232), as it is described in verses 19-21, without giving any indication that the language used in these verses may be metaphorical in kind:

But (thus it is:) as for those who are bent on denying the truth – garments of fire shall be cut out for them (in the life to come); burning despair will be poured over their heads, causing all that is within their bodies, as well as the skins, to melt away. And they shall be held (in this state as if) by iron grips.

On the contrary, Islahi finds that the punishment fits the nature of their wrongdoing (*yahan 'amal aur jaza ki mushabahat*, *ibid*, p. 233) and uses the same kind of language to describe the reward provided for those who deserve it (*ibid*).

It is interesting to note that Islahi recognizes the influence of a particular culture on the way language is understood (*ahl 'arab misriyon aur iraniyon ke tamaddun se muta'ssir they*, *ibid*, p. 234).¹⁴⁴ Since each new period introduces its own peculiar understanding, Islahi says that we must be aware of the meaning grasped by those to whom the verses were first addressed (*ahwal-i-akhirat ki ta'bir in alfaz o tamsilat se ki jati hai jo mukhatab ke liye qarib alfahm hon*, *ibid*, p. 234). Hence, the phrase from verse 27:

they will come unto thee on foot and on every (kind of) fast mount
is an expression of metaphors (*iste'arat*, *ibid*, p. 243), which need to be understood according to the changing times (*ab zamana ki taraqi ne is daur*

¹⁴⁴ It would seem that Arabic culture was influenced more by Syria and Iraq than by Egypt, however.

mein buson, lariyon, motoron aur hawai jahazon ko bhi sharik kar dia hai, ibid). Islahi focuses on the particular context for the correct meaning of these verses (*in ayat ka siyaq is bat par dalil hai*, ibid) and concludes that an Islamic government has a duty to safeguard the pilgrimage. In a similar vein, Islahi explains the concept of a “plain warner” (*nazirun mubin*) of verse 49 by means of a discussion of Arabic customs prevalent at the time.

Moreover, since life in the dry Arabian surroundings depends on the availability of water, Islahi understands the phrase from verse 45: “And how many a well lies abandoned” as a *symbolic* expression of the destruction that occurred (*kunwiyon ki wirani ta'bir hai sari hama hami aur tamam chahal pahal ke khatm ho jane ki*, ibid, p. 264). Similarly, the phrase from the same verse: “how many a castle that (once) stood high!” is a *symbolic* expression of the pomp and splendor of life that has now vanished (*is ka matlab ye hoga ke kitne parshakwa aur buland o bala awan o mahal hain jo bilkul matruk o mahjaur pare hain*, ibid). In the same way, Islahi says that the word for “goodly sustenance” in verse 58 is an expression for God’s limitless blessings (*khuda ke bepayan ni'mat*, ibid, p. 279). In addition, Islahi says that the Surah contains several parables (*tamsil*) and comparisons or similes.¹⁴⁵ He does not elaborate on the way these literary devices should be understood except to mention that the parable in verse 47 is similar to that found in the Gospel (cf. ibid, pp. 265-266).

The way of God

The “way of God” (*sunnat ilahi*) is usually combined with the concept of the completion of revelation (*itmam-i-hujjat*, ibid, p. 221)¹⁴⁶ Islahi explains these concepts in terms of the time of revelation (*is daur mein*, ibid), which seems to limit their application to that period of time.¹⁴⁷ Yet these concepts help him answer his own questions about the way corruption and oppression continues to exist in the world, in spite of God’s revelation through the Prophet. Islahi explains that the concept of “the way of God” allows evildoers a respite (*dhil*) until God decides that they cannot be converted. Believers, however, are given the good news of their future success but have

¹⁴⁵ Islahi says that verse 31 contains a parable (cf. ibid, p. 246) and that verse 73 also contains a parable (cf. ibid, p. 285). He also explains verses 49-51 in the way of a comparison (*jis tarah*, ibid, p. 267) and that verse 49 can be explained in the same way (*jis tarah*, ibid, p. 266).

¹⁴⁶ Islahi sometimes combines these two concepts in this Surah. For example, cf. ibid, pp. 271-272.

¹⁴⁷ For examples of the way Islahi sets these concepts in the context of the time of revelation, cf. ibid, p. 227, pp. 230-231, p. 259 and p. 269.

to endure a period of waiting during which God provides various tests (*imtehan*) of their sincerity.

Conclusions

In his introduction, Islahi says the Surah is Meccan because of the imminent migration (*hijrat ka waqt bilku qarib a chukka*, ibid, p. 203). Most scholars, however, are of the opinion that the Surah is Medinan and that it was revealed around the same time as Surah *Al Baqarah*.

Further, Islahi seems to see an essential connection between the purpose of the construction of the House of Prayer and its custodianship by the Muslims (*bait allah ke maqsud ta'mir . . . ke is ghar ki tuliat ke asl haqdar . . . musalman hain*, ibid). But the issue of custodianship of the House of Prayer was not part of the purpose for its construction, which was to provide a focal point for the pilgrimage and other rituals. The custodianship of the House of Prayer had passed through many hands since the time of Abraham. Shortly after the death of the last Prophet (peace be upon him), there were four rival parties competing for its custodianship and those with political and military power took over this responsibility. It was not a religious responsibility as such.

Islahi rejects the way earlier commentators presented the “occasions of revelation” (*hamare mufasarin ne . . . apni kitabon mein is ayat ki shan-i-nuzul ki haisiyat se daraj kar di hai*, ibid, p. 271) and argues that many verses have no need of an “occasion of revelation” (*kisi shan-i-nuzul ki mukhtaj nahin hai*, ibid) as their context emerges from a close study (*tadabbur*) of the text.¹⁴⁸ For example, as a result of investigating the text itself, Islahi finds that the Surah is directed to the Quraysh (*ye isharah quraysh ki taraf hai*, ibid, p. 238). However, the text of the present Surah does not support the theory of a conflict between the Muslims and the Quraysh. Islahi also says the Surah makes an allusion to the Quraysh (*is mein bhi quraysh ke riwayat par ta'riz hai*, ibid, p. 242). Clearly, Islahi gives greater significance to such allusions that he finds within the text than to the “occasions of revelation”. His general rejection of the *shan-i-nuzul*, however, goes against the general view of Muslim scholars.

¹⁴⁸ Neal Robinson writes: “Amin Ahsan Islahi has demonstrated that whereas the various *asbab an-nuzul* often give the impression that a Surah is a series of disconnected revelations, a painstaking examination of the Surah itself usually shows that it is a unified whole with a coherent structure. He therefore considers that these traditions should only be taken into account when dealing with *ayahs* which refer explicitly to specific incidents.” Robinson (1996), p. 63.

Islahi views the Surah in the light (*is roshni mein*) of the intense conflict between two factions (*asl fariq do hain*, *ibid*, p. 228): the Muslims (*ahl iman*) and the unbelievers (*mushrikin*). It is remarkable that Islahi includes the Jews in one group together with the unbelievers (*ek taraf musalman they dusri taraf mushrikin aur yahud*, *ibid*) – since the Jews were believers. Yet this is consistent with the way he understands the election, mentioned in verse 78, as referring only to the Muslims (*dusron ko khwa quraysh ho ya yahud, ma'zul kar ke*, *ibid*, p. 288) and to the deposition and the exclusion of all others (*allah ne tumhara intikhab sab ko ma'zul kar ke*, *ibid*, p. 289). The Muslims were on one side and everyone else was on the other.

However, this does not seem to be consistent with the way Islahi understands verses 52-54 of the following Surah *Al Mu'minun*, which describes God's original purpose in establishing a single religious community (*ek hi ummat – ummat muslimah – ke qaim karne ki jiddo-jahd ki*, *ibid*, p. 326). The one religion (*din*) is present in all communities and peoples (*tamam milleton aur qaumon ka asal din*, *ibid*). How does Islahi find a place for the Jews and the Christians in a *din* from which they have been deposed and excluded?¹⁴⁹

Accordingly, he finds a common element between verse 67 of the present Surah, verse 148 of *Al Baqarah* and verse 48 of *Al Maidah* and says that these verses are not an expression of tolerance of these different religious groups (*ye yahud o nisara ke sath rawadari ki hidayat nahin hai*, *ibid*, p. 283) but, on the contrary, are expressions of protest against their practices. Islahi reads these verses in the light of the particular situation of conflict and polarization that he has described between the Muslims and all the other groups (*in halat mein ye ayat utrin*, *ibid*, p. 234). In this case, these verses would apply only to those groups at that time in history and have no further meaning today.

Occasionally, Islahi seems to make general statements that could refer to Muslims of all times and places (*musalmanon par har is sar zamin ke liye*, *ibid*, p. 258). He gives general advice to Muslims (*cf. ibid*, p. 250) and makes all-encompassing remarks about Islam (*islam to tamam kainat ki fitrat hai*, *ibid*, p. 289). He also urges all Muslims to take up *jihad* under certain conditions (*aj musalmanon ke bhi ye ijazat di ja rahi hai*, *ibid*, pp. 256-257) and gives every Muslim the right to defend the House of Prayer

¹⁴⁹ In my view, verse 48 of Surah *Al Maidah* affirms the diversity of the one believing community.

(*tamam dunya ke musalmanon par jihad farz ho jayega*, *ibid*, p. 240). Whereas Islahi usually restricts verses to the specific context of the time of revelation, he considers these verses to be universal in their application.¹⁵⁰ He does not discuss the question why many verses of the Qur'an must be understood in the light of a specific context whereas other verses may be lifted out of a specific context and given a general connotation.

Islahi makes use of Qur'anic parallels (*quran ke nazair*, *ibid*, p. 218) without considering the different context of each verse or group of verses – even after admitting that a verse can have many meanings (*mukhtalif ma'ni*, *ibid*, p. 248). A significant illustration of Islahi's use of Qur'anic parallels is the way Islahi finds a parallel in several other Surahs for verse 41 of the present Surah, which he says points to the area around Mecca.¹⁵¹

Despite the fact that Islahi recognizes that the Qur'an deliberately uses language suited to the culture of its audience to describe life in the next world (*ahwal-i-akhirat ki ta'bir in alfaz o tamsilat se ki jati hai jo mukhtab ke liye qarib alfahm hon*, *ibid*, p. 234), he describes the punishment meted out to unbelievers in verses 19-21 without giving any indication that the language used in these verses may be metaphorical in kind. However, Islahi does not reject all metaphorical expressions (*iste'arat*, *ibid*, p. 243) but says they must be understood according to the changing times (*ab zamana ki taraqi ne is daur mein buson, lariyon, motoron aur hawai jahazon ko bhi sharik kar dia hai*, *ibid*, p. 243) and according to the actual context of these verses (*in ayat ka siyaq is bat par dalil hai*, *ibid*). Hence, he understands the image of abandoned wells in verse 45 as symbolic of destruction and the image of high castles in the same verse as symbolic of pomp and splendour. In short, Islahi wants to explain these metaphors and symbols according to his own perception rather than allowing the metaphors and symbols to speak for themselves.

Similarly, Islahi encourages the process of rational enquiry into the Qur'an but seems to set his own limits and conditions for this effort of rational inquiry.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ Islahi also makes very general statements about Islam and Muslims in Surah *An Nur*. Cf. my section: "Islamic Society and Government" in my discussion of that Surah.

¹⁵¹ Parallel references to the coming conquest of Mecca by the Muslims can be found, according to Islahi, in verse 41 of Surah *Ar R'ad* and in verse 44 of Surah *Al Anbiya*.

¹⁵² Islahi's arbitrary dismissal of what he calls "Arab mythology" in his commentary on the following Surah *Al Mu'mimun* (cf. *ibid*, p. 341) and his rejection of "Hindu mythology" (cf. *ibid*, p. 342) – without any effort at investigating what the term "mythology" actually means – also indicates that he is prepared to set his own preconceived limits to rational inquiry.

Surah Al Mu'minun

Introduction

The present Surah begins where the previous one left off. Surah *Al Hajj* ended by telling the Muslims, in verse 78, that the Prophet had been a witness of the true *din* from God for them:

so that the Apostle might bear witness to the truth before you, and that you might bear witness to it before all mankind.

Now it is the Muslims' obligation to be a witness for the whole of creation (*ye gawahi tum khalq par do*, vol. 5, p. 293). Islahi finds a subtle link between the last verses of the previous Surah and the first verses of the present one (*ek halqah ittisal*, *ibid*). Moreover, there is no basic difference in content between the previous Surah and the present one. The main difference is the way the Surah presents the argument (*sirf uslub-i-bayan aur nahj-i-istadlal ka farq hai*, *ibid*). The coming victory and well being (*fauz o falah*) of the believers and the disgrace (*zillat o namuradi*) of the unbelievers, which was announced in the previous Surah, is described more fully in this one. The believers are informed quite openly about the kind of future they can expect. Similarly, the unbelievers are told in no uncertain terms about the kind of disgrace that is in store for them. The signs are there for all to see in history, in nature and in the heavens (*afaq o anfus aur tarikh ki shahadat yahi hai*, *ibid*). Ultimately, falsity will succumb and the truth will prevail (*haq hi ka bol bala hoga*, *ibid*).

The Social Context

Instead of turning to the "occasions of revelation", Islahi describes the social, cultural and political context in which the verses were revealed. Verse 3 says:

And who turn away from all that is frivolous.

While this verse is addressed to the believers, it contains an allusion to the idle talk of their *opponents* as well (*mauqa' kalam ek aur zamani mafhum ki taraf bhi isharah kar raha hai. wo ye ke is mein mukhalafin ki in kharafat par ek ta'riz bhi hai jo wo islam aur musalmanon ke khilaf har waqt bikte rahte they*, *ibid*, p. 297):

Moreover, verses 12-22 are revealed in the context of the rejection by opponents of the Qur'an of any possibility of a resurrection after death (*jo log sare se akhirat hi ke qail na hon*, *ibid*, p. 301). Likewise, Islahi connects

verse 111 directly with the Muslims who were suffering oppression from their opponents at that time (*jo is daur mein mutakbarin ke zulm aur thithak ka hadif bane hue they*, *ibid*, p. 349):

(But,) behold, today I have rewarded them for their patience in adversity: verily, it is they, they who have achieved a triumph!"

According to Islahi, the present Surah goes into far greater detail than the previous Surah about the historical conflict between the Prophets and those who opposed them (*is mein fil jumlah tafsil hai*, *ibid*, p. 308). The words of verse 25: "He is nothing but a madman" repeat what the Quraysh were saying about the Prophet (*bilkul isi qism ki bat quraysh ke lidaron ne an hazrat salla allahu alayhi wa sallam ke muta'alliq kahin*, *ibid*, p. 314). Furthermore, verse 43 also contains a warning for the Quraysh (*ye quraysh ko tanbih hai*, *ibid*, p. 320):

No community can ever forestall (the end of) its term – and neither can they delay (its coming).

Similarly, Islahi implies that verse 54 is directed to the Quraysh (*ibid*, p. 327)¹⁵³:

But leave them alone, lost in their ignorance, until a (future) time.

While verse 76 does not apply to the Quraysh but to those whose way of life was similar to the Quraysh (*ibid*, p. 337), verses 78-79 address the Quraysh directly (*ab ye in ko bara-i-rast mukhatab kar ke*, *ibid*, p. 338):

(O men! Pay heed to God's messages,) for it is He who has endowed you with hearing, and sight, and minds: (yet) how seldom are you grateful!

And He it is who has caused you to multiply on earth; and unto Him you shall be gathered.

According to Islahi, all these verses express the situation of conflict that existed between the Prophet and the Quraysh.

In contrast, Islahi describes the historical context of verses 52-53 in terms of conflict *within* the community:

And, verily, this community of ours is one single community, since I am the Sustainer of you all: remain, then, conscious of Me!

But they (who claim to follow you) have torn their unity wide asunder, piece-by-piece, each group delighting in (but) what they themselves possess (by way of tenets).

¹⁵³ Islahi says that verse 69 is also directed to the Quraysh (cf. *ibid*, p. 335).

Islahi understands these verses as stating that, instead of establishing various religious communities through the Prophets, God sought to establish a single religious community (*ek hi ummat – ummat muslimah – ke qaim karne ki jiddo-jahd ki*, *ibid*, p. 326). He understands the Prophets as having proclaimed nothing but the one religion (*asal din se alag koi chiz nahin pesh ki*, *ibid*). The Qur'an has perfected this *din* (*us ne asal din ko . . . bilkul nikhar kar*) and presented it in its original form (*asli surat mein pesh kar dia*, *ibid*). The one *din* is present in all communities and peoples (*tamam milleton aur qaumon ka asal din*, *ibid*) but, owing to their short sightedness, these people have become engrossed in their own versions and expressions of it (*lekin qaumon ne apni tang nazri aur ta'ssub ke sabab se is ki mukhalafat ki*, *ibid*). Islahi's analysis of *din* reflects the way he imagines the sort of difficulties the believers were experiencing at the time of revelation.

Islahi says that the words from verse 51 are a specific allusion to the situation of conflict that the Prophet was facing:

O you Apostles! Partake of the good things of life, and do righteous deeds: verily, I have full knowledge of all that you do.

Islahi explains that the verse refers to the disagreement regarding legitimate and illegitimate food, which led some people to oppose the Prophet (*apne mushrakana tawahhumat ke taht tayibat ko haram aur khabais ko halal tahraya*, *ibid*, p. 325).¹⁵⁴

Furthermore, by showing how some verses provided consolation or encouragement for the Prophet in his difficult circumstances, Islahi is, in effect, describing the context of those verses in various ways (*nabi salla allahu alayhi wa sallam ke liye tasalli aur ap ke mukhalafin ke liye malammat*, *ibid*, 336).¹⁵⁵ For example, Islahi says that there is an emphasis on glad tidings in verse 95:

(Pray thus-) for, behold, We are most certainly able to let thee witness (the fulfillment, even in this world, of) whatever We promise them!

This message of hope was revealed at a time when the conditions for the Muslims were very difficult (*is liye ke is daur mein abhi halat bahut namusa'id they*, *ibid*, p. 346). Islahi goes on to explain how difficult it was to bring some light into this darkness (*ye bawar karna kuch asan nahin tha ke isi tariki ke andar se 'anqarib roshni paida hone wali hai*, *ibid*).¹⁵⁶ By

¹⁵⁴ Muhammad Asad says that the verse is simply an indication of "the humanness and mortality" of the Prophets. Asad (1980), p. 524, footnote 27.

¹⁵⁵ Islahi discusses other verses that also express consolation (*tasalli*) and encouragement for the Prophet. Cf. *ibid*, pp. 325-326 and p. 337.

¹⁵⁶ Islahi's reference to the darkness of the situation in which the Prophet (peace be upon him) found himself contrasts with Islahi's frequent reference to the promise of victory for the Muslims.

mentioning modern Muslims specifically in relation to verses 84-85 (*jis mein bil'umum ajkal ke musalman muftala hain*, *ibid*, p. 340), Islahi only highlights the fact that his discussion is limited to the context that existed at the time of revelation.

Knowledge of the way of life of the Arabs contributes to an understanding of the references to the garden in verse 19 (*ahl 'arab ke han ek achhe bagh ka tasawwur*, *ibid*, p. 306), to the cattle in verse 20 (*in ka gobar bhi tumhare khaitiyon ke liye khad ka kam deta hai*, *ibid*, p. 307) and to the means of transport mentioned in verse 21 (*ahl 'arab ke zindagi*, *ibid*). Yet Islahi is careful to mention that these are all examples (*yahan asal haqiqat par naghah rahe ke maqsud in chizon ke zikr se dars-i-'ibarat hai*, *ibid*). Moreover, Islahi dismisses Arab mythology (cf. *ibid*, p. 341) and compares it to Hindu mythology (cf. *ibid*, p. 342) since the pagan Arabs (*mushrikin-i-'arab*, *ibid*, p. 340) accepted the fact of God but considered the resurrection to be only a hypothesis (*mafruzah*).¹⁵⁷

Finally, Islahi sometimes describes the context by summarizing the meaning of the verses as he understands them. For example, verse 33 says:

And (every time) the great ones among his people, who refused to acknowledge the truth and gave the lie to the announcement of a life to come – (simply) because We had granted them ease and plenty in (their) worldly life, and they had become corrupted by it – (every time) they would say: “This (man) is nothing but a mortal like yourselves, eating of what you eat, and drinking of what you drink”.

Islahi seems to provide a summary or paraphrase of this verse (*unhone samjha ke in ki ye dunyawii kamyabiyan in ke 'amal aur 'aqida ki saihat ki dalil hai*, *ibid*, p. 318).¹⁵⁸

Transcending the Specific Context

Islahi provides further support for his notion of coherence by formulating general concepts that have a very wide or even universal application. For example, he extends the meaning of verses 12-14 to cover the excellence of the creation of all mankind (*insan ko . . . baihterin sakht aur baihterin salahiyaton ke sath paida kiya hai*, *ibid*, p. 305). He also encompasses the

¹⁵⁷ The Arabs did not have a mythology. Moreover, pre-Islamic poetry bears witness that the Arabs understood their gods only as intercessors and that they both believed in a supreme God and in an after-life.

¹⁵⁸ Further examples of the way Islahi tends to summarize verses or groups of verses can be found in *ibid*, p. 316, p. 337 and p. 341.

whole world in his discussion of the “truth” in verse 71 (*agar ye tamam iqdaran ki khwahishon ke mutabiq talapat ho jayen to is dunya ka sara akhlaqi nizam darham burham ho jaye*, *ibid*, p. 335), linking the discussion about “success and prosperity” in the world (*is dunya ki najat o falah*, *ibid*, p. 336) to the struggle between truth and falsity itself (*haq . . . ya batal*, *ibid*). Verse 80 clearly refers to all human beings (*har insan ke liye qayamat ki yad dahani hai*, *ibid*, p. 339)

Islahi makes sweeping generalizations that are critical of western society (*maujuda magribi aur magribzada sosaiti*, *ibid*, p. 298) saying that, because there is no ban on sexual license in the West, it can be curbed only by force. These general statements support Islahi’s view that the Surah has a consistent theme and is, therefore, thematically coherent. This theme (*‘umud*) is presented at the beginning of the discussion (cf. p. 293) and Islahi summarizes the main points of the Surah to show that they are in keeping with the theme he has presented. For example, verse 30 says:

In this (story), behold, there are messages indeed (for those who think): for, verily, We always put (man) to a test.

This verse provides Islahi with an opportunity to summarize the abiding lesson (*mustaqil dars*, *ibid*, p. 317) of the Surah by formulating it according to four truths (*haqaiq*, *ibid*), each of which he had already introduced and explained earlier in the Surah. The four truths are:

1. God has sent his messengers to bring guidance and to promote reform (*islah o hidayat*, *ibid*, p. 317).
2. God provides people with the opportunity to reject his messengers during a certain period of time (*allah ta’ala in ko dhil deta hai*, *ibid*). When that time has passed, God intervenes (*khuda in ko pakarta hai*, *ibid*).
3. In the struggle between truth and falsity (*haq o batil ki kashmakash*, *ibid*), the Prophet and his followers will have success and prosperity (*fauz o falah*, *ibid*.) after enduring many trials.
4. Since all the Prophets brought a single message and those who opposed it used a similar approach (*mukhalafin ki mukhalafat ka andaz bhi hamesha se ek hi raha hai*, *ibid*). Hence, there is an abiding lesson in the life of every Prophet for every other Prophet and in the narrative account of any people for any other people (*har ummat ki sar guzasht dusri ummat ke liye ek mustaqil dars hai*, *ibid*).

By providing general summaries like this, Islahi intends to show how the Surah is coherent.

Islahi seeks an explanation of the way the believers will be established in this present world (*tamakan fil ard*) by looking at the situation into which the Surah was revealed. Viewing the Surah in the light of its historical context, Islahi concludes that verse 1:

Truly, to a happy state shall attain the believers
is primarily addressed to those believers who were forced to emigrate from Mecca (*ahl iman hain jo is daur mein haq ki khatir hijrat aur jihad ki baziyan khel rahe they*, *ibid*, p. 296). However, Islahi admits that the announcement of their success (*faiz almaram*, *ibid*) and prosperity (*falah*) is actually a reference to life in the next world (*yahan jis falah ki basharat hai is ka haqiqi sumrah to falah-i-akhirat hai*, *ibid*) and in heaven (*wohi khuda ki jinnat ke waris honge aur yahi asal kamyabi hai*, *ibid*, p. 301). In fact, later in the Surah, Islahi links “success and prosperity” with eternal salvation (*najat o falah*, *ibid*, p. 313). Nevertheless, Islahi asserts that, included in this announcement, is a reference to the establishment of a community of believers in this world (*is ke andar tamakan fil ard ki wo basharat bhi muzamar hai*, *ibid*). Islahi explains that, since the earthly dimension of this prosperity was already alluded to in the previous Surah, the present Surah refers only to the fundamental reality of this prosperity, namely, the after-life in heaven, (*is surah mein asal in'am – firdaus – ka zikr hua*, *ibid*), which naturally includes the other dimensions (*dusri chizen is ke taht khud ba khud a gayi*, *ibid*).

Subsequent verses outline these other dimensions. The success and welfare of the believers depends firstly on the way they pray (*jis par mazkurah falah ka inhisar hai*, *ibid*). According to Islahi, verse 4:

and who are intent on inner purity
refers to the “success and prosperity” that comes from a harmonious relationship between God and among people in general (*jo banda khalq aur khaliq donon se sahih bunyad par marbut ho jaye, dar haqiqat wohi banda dunya aur akhirat donon ki falah ka sazawar hai*, *ibid*, p. 297-298). In keeping with his universal approach to these verses, Islahi gives a very general interpretation to verse 8:

and who are faithful to their trusts and to their pledges
allowing it to cover all manner of duties and responsibilities that people take up in society (*quwwaton aur salahiyaton, faraiz aur zimmadariyon ki shakl mein ya in'amat o afzal aur amwal o aulad ki surat mein hamare hawale ki hain*, *ibid*, p. 299). Clearly, Islahi is trying to present a universal teaching by going beyond the social context of Mecca.

Looking at verses 55-61 from the point of view of the theme (*'umud*), Islahi says that these verses distinguish a false concept of “success and prosperity” (*ye jin chizon ko kamyabiyan tasawwur kiye hue hain ye kamyabiyan nahin hain*, *ibid*, p. 327) from the quality of true success (*haqiqi kamyabiyon ke rah*, *ibid*). Similarly, Islahi says that the last verses of the Surah, especially verses 93-94, express the imminent victory of the Prophet and his followers in this world and in the next (*ab fath o nusrat ka waqt qarib hai. ahl iman kamyab o fathmand aur ap ke mukhalafin dunya o akhirat donon ki raswai se duchar honge*, *ibid*, p. 342). The triumph referred to verse 111 is for those who remained faithful to the message of the Prophet:

(But,) behold, today I have rewarded them for their patience in adversity: verily, it is they, they who have achieved a triumph!

Islahi says that the verse implies the downfall of those who ridiculed the Prophet (*ye bat ap se ap nikli ke in ka mazaq urane wale namurad hue*, *ibid*, p. 349).

Islahi seems to be grappling with the precise meaning of the concept “success and prosperity” promised to the believers *in this world*. He began by suggesting that those who first migrated to Medina were the ones to experience “success and prosperity”, yet subsequently he wants to extend the concept of “success and prosperity” so that it may have a more universal connotation. However, Surah Group Three seems to link “success and prosperity” overwhelmingly with life *in the next world* rather than with life in this world. In short, Islahi interprets the words “success and prosperity” in a way that accords with his formulation of the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah.

Parallel Verses

Islahi's use of parallels (*nazair*, *ibid*, p. 347) also contributes to his argument that the Surah is coherent because he uses them to show that the same idea is repeated in different places in the Surah. Moreover, Islahi sees an argument for coherence in the fact that the present Surah ends in the way it started (*nazm-i-quran ke nihayat wazeh dalail mein se hai*, *ibid*, p. 349). Islahi seeks to strengthen his argument for the coherence of this Surah by comparing words from the first verse with words from the second-to-last verse (*surah sharu' hui thiy . . . khatm ho gayi*, *ibid*, p. 350). He ends by saying that the last verse expresses the hope, in the form of a prayer, that the believers will actually experience the victory that has been the main theme of the Surah (*'umud*, *ibid*, p. 351).

Islahi uses parallels (*nazair*) to support his description of the opposition which the Prophet had to face.¹⁵⁹ I have discussed how Islahi deals with conflict *within* the community in the section on “the specific context”.¹⁶⁰ Islahi finds parallel verses for his view about the original unity of the community in verses 52-53 of this Surah. He finds a further parallel to these verses in verse 213 of Surah *Al Baqarah*, which he quotes in full (cf. *ibid*, p. 326).

Different Kinds of Language

Islahi says that the meaning of idiomatic expressions cannot be determined simply by knowledge of the words alone since the way the words are used must also be taken into account (*in mahawarat ka mafhum mata'in karne mein alfaz ka lihaz nahin balke sirf is mafhum ka lihaz hota hai jis ke liye ye iste'mal hote hain*, *ibid*, p. 315-316). Islahi sometimes uses a simile to convey his understanding¹⁶¹. However, he describes the “anger of God” without using metaphorical language. Hence, on the one hand, Islahi refers to the bounteous generosity of God (*khuda . . . ke be payan faiz*, *ibid*, p. 304) and, on the other hand, to the “anger” of God (*khuda ke qahr o ghazab*, *ibid*, p. 313) without pointing out that God’s attributes can only be described by the use of metaphorical language. In fact, Islahi insists that, though the Surah is referring to ancient history, the anger of God remains a present reality (*in ke 'adam iman par khuda ka jo ghazab hai wo badastur baqi hai*, *ibid*, p. 321).

Furthermore, Islahi has a physical understanding of the “lofty place” in verse 50:

And (as We exalted Moses, so, too,) We made the son of Mary and his mother a symbol (of Our grace), and provided for both an abode in a lofty place of lasting restfulness and unsullied springs.

He says that the “lofty place” refers to the physical environment provided for the son of Mary and his mother (*yahan khajur ka ek musmir drakht bhi tha aur is ke niche ek saf o shafaf shirin chashma bhi*, *ibid*, p. 322). Similarly, Islahi has a *prima facie* understanding for the verb *khasa'* in verse 108 (translated as “Away with you”) since he is content to say that the word is used in the sense of driving away dogs (*kutte ko dhatkarne ke liye ata hai*,

¹⁵⁹ Cf. *ibid*, p. 297, p. 314 and p. 349.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. above, p. 2.

¹⁶¹ An example of his use of the simile can be found in his discussion of verse 70, cf. *ibid*, p. 335.

ibid, p. 348). Instead of discussing the allegorical nature of the dialogue between God and human beings in this and the final verses of the Surah (verses 109-118), Islahi approaches these verses in a logical way (*ye kis tarah mumkin hai ke wo apni ra'iiyyat ke darmiyan 'adl o insaf na kare aur zulm o mazlum donon ko yaksan kar de*, ibid, p. 350). A rational description of the way God rejects and punishes the unbelievers provides a better illustration of the thematic coherence of the Surah.

The Way of God

Islahi makes use of the concept of “the way of God” (*sunnat ilahi*) to move beyond the specific context and to show how the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah takes effect in the history of nations. The concept explains that believers in general find “success and prosperity” and those who reject the truth experience loss (*ahl iman ki falah aur haq ki takzib karne walon ka khusran*, ibid, p. 308). According to this concept, the believers will undergo a trial or test (*imtehan sakht*, ibid, p. 328) in this world (*is dunya mein ahl-i-haq ki bhi azmaish karta hai*) while the unbelievers will be given sufficient time to reform themselves (*dhil*) before they are brought to punishment (ibid). The unbelievers tend to think that this extra time that they are given is a sign of their vindication (*wo is dhil ko apni kamyabi tasawwur karte hain*, ibid), whereas in reality it is leading them to destruction. Islahi limits his description to the time of revelation.

Islahi uses the same concept of “the way of God” to explain verse 77, whose last word (*mublisun*, broken in spirit) illustrates God’s way of dealing with rebellious nations (*isi haqiqat ki taraf ayat ke akhri alfaz isharah kar rahe hai*, ibid, p. 338). The same concept explains how God establishes a nation on earth when that nation accepts the message of the Prophet who has been sent to it (*is qaum ko baromand karta aur zamin mein is ko iqtidar bakhshata hai*, ibid, p. 334). Islahi uses the same concept to explain verse 71 (*jis qaum ne is yad dahani ki qadar ki us ne falah payi, jis ne is ki qadar na ki wo fana kar di gayi*, ibid, p. 336):

But if the truth were in accord with their own likes and dislikes, the heavens and the earth would surely have fallen into ruin, and all that lives in them (would long ago have perished)!

Nay, (in this divine writ) We have conveyed unto them all that they ought to bear in mind: and from this their reminder they (heedlessly) turn away!

Associated with this concept is the idea of the completion of revelation (*itmam-i-hujjat*, *ibid*, p. 313) in order to explain that unbelievers will be destroyed only after they have rejected all efforts by God to convince them of the truth.¹⁶² Yet only God knows when the time for such destruction will come (*khuda hi janta hai ke kab koi qaum apne akhlaqi zawal ki is had ko pahunchi*, *ibid*, p. 320). Once again, the analysis seems to be limited to the history of the believers up to and including the appearance of the last Prophet.

¹⁶² The same concept is expressed in *ibid*, p. 316 and p. 317.

Conclusions

The majority of scholars say the previous Surah is Medinan while the present Surah is Meccan. Islahi says that both these Surahs are Meccan and so he can find a link (*ek halqah ittisal*, *ibid*) between them and conclude that they are thematically coherent.

Islahi says that the only main difference between these two Surahs is the way each presents the argument (*sirf uslub-i-bayan aur nahj-i-istadlal ka farq hai*, *ibid*, p. 293)¹⁶³. Islahi does not explain his assertion that the present Surah provides more details than the previous one (*us mein fil jumlah tafsil hai*, *ibid*, p. 308) nor does he examine what influence these styles of expression (*uslub-i-bayan*) have on the way the theme (*'umud*) and the content of the Surah are conceived and formulated. What I am suggesting is that the way the Surah is expressed must have an influence on the way it is understood.

Islahi refers to the context in this Surah with words like: *mauqa' kalam*, and *zamani mafhum* (*ibid*, p. 297). He repeats certain terms already used in Surah *Al Hajj*, namely: *isharah* and *ta'riz* to bring out the implications and the allusions made by the text.¹⁶⁴ He also frequently describes the conditions that were peculiar to a particular period (*is daur mein abhi halat bahut namusa'id they*, *ibid*, p. 346). In addition, Islahi says that references to the "garden" in verse 19, to "cattle" in verse 20 and to "means of transport" in verse 21 are examples of the Arabic way of life and culture that help to understand the Qur'an (*dars-i-'ibrat*, *ibid*, p. 307).¹⁶⁵ In other words, one cannot understand the Qur'an without knowing the social and cultural context. Islahi does not discuss how this specific social and cultural context relates to the universal meaning of the Qur'an.

However, Islahi does attempt to transcend the specific context with his references to the struggle between truth and falsity involving all mankind (*har insan ke liye*, *ibid*, p. 339), the whole world (*is dunya ka sara akhlaqi nizam*, *ibid*, p. 335) and the salvation of the whole world (*is dunya ki najat o*

¹⁶³ Islahi uses a very similar expression in his commentary on Surah *Maryam* to indicate the difference in the flow of thought and expression (*tariq-i-istadlal aur najh bayan mein farq hai*, vol. 4, p. 629).

¹⁶⁴ Islahi uses the terms *isharah* and *ta'riz* in his commentary on Surah *Al Hajj*. Cf. vol. 5, p. 238 and p. 242 (respectively).

¹⁶⁵ It is questionable whether the concept of "garden" was part of the Arabic social or cultural life. Islahi himself describes the area around Mecca as rocky and infertile (*ek wadi ghair zi zar' mein*, vol. 4, p. 328).

falah, ibid, p. 336). Islahi also makes sweeping generalizations about western society (*maujuda magribi aur magribzada sosaiti*, ibid, p. 298). In making these generalizations, however, Islahi is preoccupied with his argument that the Surah has a consistent theme and is, therefore, thematically coherent.

Furthermore, Islahi summarizes in four points the “messages for those who think” in verse 30, thereby claiming to provide the abiding lesson (*mustaqil dars*, ibid, p. 317) and the truths (*haqaiq*, ibid) contained in the Surah. Islahi does not consider the possibility that *other* messages may also be contained in verse 30. He claims that his summary expresses the message of the whole Surah and demonstrates its thematic coherence. Islahi makes summaries of other Surahs in a similar fashion.

Islahi says that the meaning of idiomatic expressions cannot be determined simply by knowledge of the words themselves but that one must take into account the way the words are used (*jis ke liye ye iste'mal hote hain*, ibid, p. 316). However, Islahi understands many expressions in the Qur'an in a physical, *prima facie* way. It is questionable whether the words of the Surah were originally used in the rational, logical way that Islahi understands them in his commentary. Moreover, he does not consider whether the way words are used in the modern world has any significance for the way we understand the Qur'an today.

Islahi accepts the fact that the Surah relates history only with the specific purpose of conveying some truth (*maqsud is se tarikh ki roshni mein is haqiqat ko wazeh karna hai jo yahan zer-i-bahs hai*, ibid, p. 308). The purpose of an historical narrative becomes clear when it is linked to a subsequent event in history. For example, Islahi links the account of the prayer of the Prophet Noah in verses 28-29 with the prayer of the last Prophet (peace be upon him) at the time of the migration (*hamare hazur ne bhi hijrat ke waqt isi tarah ki dua farmai thiy*, ibid, p. 316). Similarly, the life of the Prophet Joseph is a mirror by which to understand the life of the last Prophet (peace be upon him).¹⁶⁶ Islahi gives many examples in his commentary of the way in which one historical period throws light on

¹⁶⁶ I mentioned in my discussion of Surah *Yusuf* that the time of revelation of this Surah would not have made it possible for the last Prophet (peace be upon him) to see Surah *Yusuf* as a mirror of his own experiences.

another. He could have investigated how the historical narratives function as mirrors for subsequent periods of history right up to the present.

Moreover, Islahi says that a nation has success when it is morally responsible and declines when it loses this sense of moral responsibility (*jis qaum ne is yad dahani ki qadar ki us ne falah payi, jis ne is ki qadar na ki wo fana kar di gayi*, *ibid*, p. 336). He uses the concept of *sunnat-i-ilahi* and the concept of *itmam-i-hujjat* to explain how this works in practice. It seems to me that this theory of the rise and fall of nations depends on a vision of faith whereas Islahi uses abstract concepts to explain it on the basis of reason.

Finally, parallel verses (*nazair*, *ibid*, p. 347) help to illustrate the coherence of the Surah. Islahi sees an argument for coherence in the fact that the Surah ends in the way it started (*nazm-i-quran ke nihayat wazeh dalail mein se hai*, *ibid*, p. 349).

Surah An Nur

Introduction

This *Medinan* Surah is the last of Surah Group Three. Islahi says it forms a supplement and an appendix (*takmilah aur tatimmah*, vol. 5, *ibid*, p. 355) to the previous Surah, though he had used the same words about the previous Surah as well (cf. *ibid*, p. 293). Since it seems to be part of the previous Surah (*goya sabiq surah hi ka juzu hoti hai*, *ibid*, p. 355), Islahi says that this Surah is not the first of another, separate pair of Surahs. While the Muslims were in Mecca, they could not experience any form of social organization (*ijtima'i tanzim*, *ibid*) but had to live their faith as individuals. After the migration, when they had gathered in Medina and had formed social and political structures, their faith came under the impact of these social and political realities. In this new and favorable environment, laws and regulations were revealed explicitly for the reform and purification of society (*mu'sharah ki islah o tathir*, *ibid*). Consequently, the light of faith, which until this time could be reflected only in the life of an individual, found a new means of expression and became visible through social organization (*haiyat-i-ijtima'i par zulfagun hui*, *ibid*).

The special character of this Surah is that it was revealed to enlighten the believers about laws and regulations required by the specific circumstances of the period (*waqt ke khas halat ke mutabiq*, *ibid*). For it was necessary both to enlighten the believers about the demands of a life of faith lived in their new social circumstances (*nau tashkil mu'sharah*, *ibid*) as well as to protect them from those elements that were working to destroy it.

The Theme of the Surah

Islahi refers to the theme ('*umud*) in the context of verse 23:

Those who (falsely, and without repentance,) accuse chaste women who may have been unthinkingly careless but have remained true to their faith, shall be rejected (from God's grace) in this world as well as in the life to come.

This verse refers to the punishment that those people, who falsely accuse chaste women, will experience in this world and in the next (*dunya mein bhi 'anqarib in ki jar kat ke rahegi aur akhirat mein to in ke bahr hal 'azab-i-'azim hai hi*, *ibid*, p. 389). In fact, Islahi finds an allusion to the victory of Islam in this verse (*in munafikin par allah ta'ala ki is la'nat ka asr bilakhir*

ye zahir hua ke islam ke ghalba ne in ka aur in ke sar ghanun ka sar zamin-i-'arab se yaqalm khatama kar dia, ibid). However, the rest of his discussion is concerned only with the Last Day (*is din in ki zabane, in ke hath paun khud in ke khilaf gawahi denge*, ibid) whereas the victory of Islam occurs, according to Islahi, both in the present world and in the next world.

Islahi displays a similar ambiguity with regard to the phrase in verse 31:

And (always), O you believers – all of you - turn unto God in repentance, so that you might attain to a happy state!

He says that the phrase is addressed to the whole Muslim community (*sab ko khitab kar ke*, ibid, p. 399) and exhorts them to adopt the way that the Qur'an has recommended since this is the way to success and happiness (*yahi rasta fauz o falah ka rasta hai*, ibid). But Islahi does not clarify the nature of this "happy state" any further, except to give a cross-reference to a similar expression in verse 77 of Surah *Al Hajj*: "so that you may attain to a happy state!" and to the opening phrase of Surah *Al Muminun*: "Truly, to a happy state shall attain the believers". Islahi is content to understand these expressions as indicating the victory of Islam *in this world* and the actual situation of prosperity that is promised to the believers in this life (*is tumakan fil ard ki salahiyat*, ibid, p. 288).

According to Islahi, the verse that further clarifies the actual situation of the believers in this world is verse 55 of this Surah:

God has promised those of you who have attained to faith and do righteous deeds that, of a certainty, He will cause them to accede to power on earth, even as He caused (some of) those who lived before them to accede to it; and that, of a certainty, He will firmly establish for them the religion which He has been pleased to bestow on them; and that, of a certainty, He will cause their erstwhile state of fear to be replaced by a sense of security – (seeing that) they worship Me (alone), not ascribing divine powers to aught beside Me.

Islahi begins his discussion by referring to verses from other Surahs that came earlier in this Surah Group, namely, verses from Surah *Al Anbiya*, Surah *Al Hajj* and Surah *Al Muminun* (ibid, p. 426). According to Islahi, all the verses alluded to in these Surahs claim victory for the Prophets *in this world* (*is dunya mein ghalba lazmi hai*, ibid) and state that those who believed in the Prophets assumed leadership in society (*qayadat o siyadat*, ibid, p. 427).

Furthermore, the religion of Islam will be established in this land (*is din ko is sar zamin mein mutamakkan karega*, *ibid*) and the laws of Islam (*din*) will be implemented in it (*is din ka qanun is mulk mein chalega*, *ibid*). Moreover, the political system will be that of Islam (*isi ki اساسat par is mulk ka nizam-i-ijtim'i o siyasi ustwar hoga*, *ibid*) and no other religion will have power or authority in this country (*is din ke siwa kisi aur din ka iqtidar is mulk mein baqi nahin rahega*, *ibid*). The time will soon come (*jald wo waqt aane wala hai*, *ibid*) when God will replace fear with a state of security and no one will be able to endanger the religion of God any further (*allah ke din*, *ibid*). Islahi states that all these promises of God were fulfilled with the victory of Islam in Mecca (*fath makka*, *ibid*) when the Prophet announced that there would be no other religion in the whole of the Arabian Peninsula. There is no doubt about the success of the believers both in this world and in the next (*tum dunya aur akhirat donon mein faiz almaram hoge*, *ibid*).

Finally, we should note that Islahi also uses the concept of “the way of God” (*sunnat ilahi*) to explain how success comes to the believers (cf. *ibid*, p. 426). As we have seen, this concept is frequently used in the earlier Surahs of this Surah Group. Islahi says repeatedly that victory or defeat comes only after the Prophets have accomplished their mission to present the message of God completely and convincingly (*itmam-i-hujjat ke ba'd*, *ibid*).

The Social Context

Islahi begins by specifying the social context of verse 2:

As for the adulteress and the adulterer – flog each of them with a hundred stripes, and let not compassion with them keep you from (carrying out) this law of God, if you (truly) believe in God and the Last Day; and let a group of the believers witness their chastisement.

Since the Jews implemented the law against adultery only in the case of a poor person, while the rich were not punished (*koi amir is ka irtikab karta to is se ta'riz na karte*, *ibid*, p. 362),¹⁶⁷ the Qur'an had to clarify and to stress the nature of this punishment (*hudud ke mu'malah mein is shad ke sath takid o tanbih ki zarurat is wajh se thiy*, *ibid*). Islahi states that adultery destroys social life (*mu'sharah ke intishar o fasad mein sab se ziyadah dakhil zina ko hai*, *ibid*, p. 361) and explains that all religions consider it to be a punishable crime (cf. *ibid*, p. 362). Islam also took steps to contain the evil effects of this social sin through the laws that were revealed in this Surah when the

¹⁶⁷ In fact, this applies only to the law of stoning. The Jews did flog every person who committed adultery.

circumstances demanded it. These circumstances are mentioned also in verses 15-16 of Surah *An Nisa*. Islahi discusses verse 2 in relation with the opinions of the early jurists of Islam, as we shall see in the section below called "Islamic society and government".

Subsequently, Islahi describes the social and political context for verse 10 and the verses following it. He says that verse 10 was revealed because the Muslims were experiencing significant weaknesses (*sakht qism ki kamzauryan*) caused by the machinations of a group of people he calls the hypocrites (*munaḥḥikin*, *ibid*, p. 377). Regarding the following verses, Islahi explains that a section of the Muslim community was being influenced by certain people who were spreading false rumors in order to discredit the moral character of the Muslims (*musalmanon ki akhlaqi sakḥ ukar dene ke darpe hain*, *ibid*, p. 378). Islahi makes explicit reference to *hazrat 'aisha*, about whom the accusations were being made (cf. *ibid*, p. 381) and to a certain person who was the ringleader of those spreading the rumors (*ye ishara 'abad allah bin ubay ki taraf hai*, *ibid*, p. 383). He mentions that the Jews were irritated at the prestige in which the Muslims were held by their foes (*yahud par ye bat bahut shaq thiy ke musalmanon ki akhlaqi bartari ki dhak in ke mukhalafon ke dilon par bhi baitati ja rahi hai*, *ibid*, p. 386). Islahi is of the view that the state of the Jews was worse than that of the Arabs before the coming of Islam (*yahud ka hal, ahl kitab hone ke bawajud, in se bhi ziyadah bura tha*, *ibid*) and that the emergence of this new community of Muslims (*pakiza mu'sharah*, *ibid*) provoked the Jews to plot revenge (*intiqam lene ki tadbir*, *ibid*).

The next section of verses (27-34) relates to the custom in pre-Islamic society (*zamana jahiliyat ki sosaiti mein*, *ibid*, p. 390) of free access to one another's houses. These verses also make certain stipulations regarding the marriage of widows and of slaves since this was necessary in the new circumstances (*sosaiti mein*, *ibid*). There are also verses relating to the freedom of slaves (*ghulamon ki azadi*, *ibid*). Verse 32 says:

And you ought to marry the single from among you as well as such of your male and female slaves as are fit (for marriage)

In response, Islahi refers to social customs, prevalent at that time, which needed reform (*mu'sharah ke andar in ki islah*, *ibid*, p. 400). It is for this reason that the Qur'an offers guidance of a social nature (*quran ne mu'sharah ko hidayat farmai*, *ibid*). Islahi sees the emancipation of slaves as a gradual social process (*wo biltadrij mu'sharah ke salah ajazai ban jayenge*, *ibid*) and offers his own opinions (*mere nazdik*, *ibid*, p. 401) about

the way society should relate to slaves. It is clear that Islahi is referring to Islamic society of that period (*islahat ke is daur mein is raujhan ka paida hona ek qudrati amr tha*, ibid, p. 403). He refers to the way Islam has decreed (*islam ne zina par had jari karne ka hukm di dia*, ibid) and draws our attention to the Islamic character of the period (*islam ke daur mein*, ibid). Hence it is clear that Islahi is describing the context of Islamic history and discovers the meaning of the Surah in the light of that context (*is roshni mein*).

As regards the group of verses 41-57, Islahi describes the situation created by those people who, at that time (*is daur mein*, ibid, p. 422), approached whatever law courts that suited them, whether it be courts which operated according to Islamic law (*islam ke qanun ka faislah*) or Jewish courts (*yahud ki 'adalon mein*, ibid, p. 423). Islahi says that the doubt referred to in verse 50:

Or have they begun to doubt (that there is a divine writ)?
arose out of the situation of conflict between the Muslims and their opponents, which was going on at that time (*jo kashmakash is waqt barpa hai*, ibid).

For the last section of verses 57-64, Islahi describes the social context as the background to clarify the permissions granted in verse 61. He says the verse is a response to some people living at that time who may have thought Islam was advocating all kinds of restrictions for social intercourse (*kuch logon ne ye mahsus kiya ke islam soshyal azadion ko mahdud karna chahta hai*, ibid, p. 433). People with infirmities may have had the same impression. The verse seeks to dismiss such false impressions (*is tarah ke logon ke shubah ko dur karne ke liye*, ibid). Islahi has interpreted the verse in terms of the questions he thinks people were asking as a result of the restrictions the Qur'an had put on social intercourse.

In this Surah, Islahi also makes reference to the social context of contemporary society. He accuses the modern world of not respecting the Islamic sensitivities contained in verse 3, which concerns the nature of adultery (*lekin bahut taure log ab aisi rah gaye hain jo mu'malah ke is pahlui ko nigah mein rakhte hon jis ki taraf ayat mein rahnumai farmai gayi hai*, ibid, p. 375). Furthermore, Islahi describes the modern tendency to promote rumors in newspapers and journals as an illustration of what verse 12 seeks to prevent (cf. ibid, p. 384). Similarly, with reference to verse 30, Islahi laments the influence of modern fashion (*is zamane mein fashyon ke*

shauq, ibid, p. 396). Again, Islahi rejects the modern view that Islamic dress code for women has become obsolete (cf. ibid, p. 397). Finally, Islahi says that Islam rejects the contemporary trend of making a display of one's ornaments (*maujuda zamane ki mutabarrijat ki tarah har jaga apni zinat ki numaish karte phirna islam mein jaiz nahin hai*, ibid, p. 399). In these particular instances, Islahi has found a *modern* social context in which to understand the Surah.

In this Surah more than in any other of this Surah Group, Islahi refers to the modern world or to contemporary society in order to bring out the meaning contained in the text. Islahi explains that, just as the rich people among the Jews used to find ways of avoiding punishment by stoning (cf. ibid, p. 362), similarly in today's world there is a misguided way of thinking by which people find psychological excuses for crimes (*ab maujuda zamane mein to ye mustaqil falsafa ban gaya hai ke jo log jaraim ka irtikab karte hain wo kisi zahni bimari ke sabab se karte hain*, ibid). This wrong way of thinking makes it possible for them to abolish punishment and to replace it with other methods of reform. Islahi remarks that one has only to open one's eyes to see that such a misguided way of thinking is the reason why modern society is full of thieves and adulterers (*ap apne hi mulk ko lijiye*, ibid). One has only to look at the morning papers to realize how corrupt society is (*in ki khabaren har subah ko akhbaron mein par par kar kalija shaq hota hai*, ibid, p.363). It is clear that, in these remarks, Islahi has allowed the context of modern society to influence his understanding of the Surah.

Different Kinds of Language

Verse 3 alludes to a similarity between the person who engages in adultery and the person who accords to his or her own lust a place that should be reserved for God. This is, in effect, to be guilty of *shirk*. Islahi points out the special linguistic style used here by saying that the verse recognizes a common element between the ethical depravity of adultery and that of attributing partners to God (*zina isi tarah ki akhlaqi najasat hai jis tarah ki 'aqaidi najasat shirk hai*, ibid, p. 375). However, the specific meaning of *shirk* is religious impurity and it cannot be compared with moral depravity in this way.

Islahi states that the purpose of presenting the parables contained in verses 35-40 is to instruct the believers to let the light of faith shine into every part of their lives (*maqsud in tamsilon ke pesh karne se ahl iman par ye wazeh karna hai ke wo apni zindagi ke har goshe ko iman ki nuraniyat se*

munawwar karen, ibid, p. 406). These parables contain a corresponding lesson for the unbelievers. Islahi says that the best way of giving expression to truths (*haqaiq*) is by means of a parable (*tamsilen haqaiq ko wazeh karne ka sab se 'ala aur karigar zare'a hoti hain*, ibid, p. 411). Yet he analyzes several aspects of the parable of light, related in verse 35, by explaining words or concepts in a *material* or *physical* way, thereby disregarding the characteristic way a parable expresses truth, namely, through symbols or stories.

As an illustration, let us take verse 35 of the Surah:

A blessed tree – an olive-tree that is neither of the east nor of the west. The material or physical nature of Islahi's interpretation consists in his explanation that the tree is so blessed precisely because it is not in the corner of the garden where it would be exposed to the heat of the sun, causing it to produce less fruit (*bagh ke kinaron ke drakht bilkhasus jo mashriq ya magrib mein hun hamesha dhup aur hawa ki zad mein hone ke sabab se itne achhe phal nahin dete they*, ibid, p. 410). The tree in the center of the garden produces more fruit because it is sheltered from the heat. This is a scientific explanation using scientific language rather than an explanation based on the symbolic language of the parable. Besides, horticultural science would argue that a tree's fruitfulness is proportion to the sunlight it receives.

Furthermore, Islahi alludes to the debates between the Jews and the Christians about the direction of prayer (*in alfaz mein ek latif talmih yahud o nisara ki is naz' ke tarif bhi hai jo qibla ke ta'alluq se in ke mahain, mushriq o magrib ke bab mein, barpa hui*, ibid, p. 411).¹⁶⁸ Referring to a link between verse 35 of the present Surah and the words from verse 142 of Surah *Al Baqarah*: "God's is the east and the west", Islahi claims that these debates of the Jews and the Christians led to their being excluded from membership in the "community of the middle way" mentioned in verse 143 of Surah *Al Baqarah*, and from the possibility of their ever enjoying the benefits of Islam (*wo asl nuqta wasat se itne dur ho gaye ke hamesha ke liye ummat-i-wasat ke sharaf se mahrum ho gaye aur qabul-i-islam ki sa'dat in ko hasil na ho saki*, ibid). Islahi's conclusion about the exclusion of the Jews and the Christians from the "community of the middle way" is based on a misunderstanding of these verses, which intend to convey the fact that

¹⁶⁸ I have found no external evidence to confirm Islahi's statement that the Jews and the Christians were engaged in a debate over the direction of prayer.

the *direction* (whether it is to the east or to the west) is irrelevant. Accordingly, verse 142 of Surah *Al Baqarah* says that the guidance of God can be found in every place and in every direction:

Say: "God's is the east and the west; He guides whom He wills onto a straight way."

Similarly, verse 35 of Surah *An Nur* has the same stress on the blessing of God:

(a lamp) lit from a blessed tree – an olive tree that is neither of the east nor of the west.

Furthermore, Islahi interprets verse 36 in a figurative way:

In the houses (of worship) which God has allowed to be raised so that His name be remembered in them, there (are such as) extol His limitless glory at morn and evening.

Islahi says that these houses of worship are a symbol of the hearts of the faithful (*tamsil mein zahir hai ke mishkat se murad qalb-i-salim ya balfaz digar qalb mummin hai*, *ibid*, p. 411). In contrast to the figurative use of language in the above verse, Islahi describes the *actual, physical* houses of worship that have been erected directly with God's permission (*agarche yahan alfaz 'am hain lekin in ke aulin masdaq wo ma'bad hain jo bara-i-rast allah ta'ala ke hukm se qaim hue*, *ibid*, p. 412). In describing these actual houses of worship, Islahi is using language in a physical or material sense.

Finally, Islahi has an interesting remark with regard to the lesson referred to in verse 44:

It is God who causes night and day to alternate: in this (too), behold, there is surely a lesson for all who have eyes to see!

Islahi says that the verse urges the reader to recognize the inner in the outer and the whole in the part (*jo log wo nazr rakhte hain jo zahir ke andar batin aur juziyat ke andar kuliyaat*, *ibid*, p. 421), thereby leading to the obvious conclusion that the universe must be the work of a wise and all-powerful being (*ye kainat ek khudae hakim o qadir ki banai hui hai*, *ibid*). However, though the "nakedness" referred to in verse 58, for example, could be understood both in a *prima facie* sense as well as figuratively, Islahi does not investigate the possibility that the verse has figurative implications (cf. *ibid*, p. 431-432). Islahi opts for the literal, material understanding of the word "nakedness" in this verse.

Islamic Society and Government

Islahi portrays Islamic society in an ideal way, saying that there is no evidence of theft, adultery and banditry in Islamic societies today (*wahan na jaraim ka wujud hai na mujrimon ka. ye sirf islami hudud o ta'zirat ka dibdabah hai ke wahan na churi aur zina ke waqe'at hote hain*, ibid, p. 363). Islahi compares Islamic societies with modern society and is reminded of Christ's words: "you have made my Father's house into a den of thieves" (ibid). Islahi proceeds to list the conditions that the Islamic jurists (*hamare fuqaha*, ibid, p. 364) laid down for the implementation of Islamic punishments. From these conditions, the reader gets an impression of the kind of Islamic society that Islahi envisages. He lists the following conditions:

1. The first condition for these punishments is that only an Islamic government can implement them (*darul islam ya bilfaz digar islami hukumat ka hona zaruri hai*, ibid). Islahi says that these laws were revealed during the Islamic government in Medina.
2. The second condition is that only people who have reached maturity can undergo these punishments. Moreover, mentally challenged persons cannot be punished according to these ways.
3. The third condition is that slaves can receive these punishments only in a modified way.
4. Some jurists have held that these punishments can be administered only to Muslims. But Islahi is of the view that non-Muslims cannot be excluded from these punishments since justice and social security demand such punishments. Not to cut off the hands of non-Muslim thieves would only provide an opportunity for theft (*ghair musalmanon ko churi ka laisenz de rahi hai*, ibid). The Prophet and the ancestors (*khalfae rashidin*) support this view (ibid).
5. All the jurists agree that these punishments apply only to those not yet married. The problem arises with regard to what punishment should be given to those already married. After a lengthy discussion concerning the views of the jurists, Islahi concludes that the right punishment for adulterers who are married is that of stoning (*rajm ka makhaz quran mein kiya hai*, ibid, p. 365). It is Islahi's responsibility to find the basis for it in the Qur'an (*main quran se is saza ka makhaz aur is ka mauqa' o mahal wazeh karna apni ek zimmadari samajhta hun*, ibid, p. 367). Islahi does this by drawing on verses 33-34 of

Surah *Al Maidah*, which allows the punishment of flogging to be commuted to death by stoning (*rajm ki saza az rue surah maidah dene ka ikhtiyar rakhti hai*, *ibid*, p. 374). The purpose of these laws was for the benefit of Muslim society in Medina (*maqsud muslim mu'sharah ki husn-i-imani ko baidar karna hai*, *ibid*).

Subsequent verses of the Surah are also viewed in the light of the context of Muslim society, as it existed in Medina. Islahi argues that the Qur'an came to reform that society (*zahir hai ke is tarah ki kharabyon ki islah is waqt tak nahin ho sakti jab tak mu'sharah ke andar in ki islah ka ihsas na paida ho. is wajh se quran ne mu'sharah ko hidayat farmai*, *ibid*, p. 400). He refers to the basic ethical principle that should exist in Islamic society (*islami mu'sharah ke isi akhlaqi usul*, *ibid*, p. 383). Verse 14 is a warning for Muslims (*musalmanon ko tanbih hai*, *ibid*, p. 384) and verse 15 contains advice for Muslims (*is ayat mein musalmanon ko is khatrah se agah kiya gaya hai*, *ibid*, p. 385). Similarly, verse 21 is advice for Muslims (*ye musalmanon ko is tarah tanbih hai*, *ibid*, p. 387) and verse 31 is addressed to the whole of Islamic society (*pure muslim mu'sharah ki islah o tathir ke liye di gayi hai is wajh se sab ko khitaab kar ke*, *ibid*, p. 399). Similarly, Islahi constantly refers to the whole of Islamic society in his discussion of verses 32-33 (cf. *ibid*, pp. 400-403). Yet he understands all these verses from the point of view of Islamic society, as it existed in Medina.

Conclusions

Islahi says that the present Surah provides a supplement and an appendix (*takmilah aur tatimah*, *ibid*, p. 355) to the previous Surah. It is not clear how Surah *An Nur*, which is a Medinan Surah, could be a supplement for Surah *Al Muminun*, which is a Meccan Surah revealed in different circumstances. Besides, Surah *Al Muminun* discusses very general topics whereas Surah *An Nur* deals with more specific topics such as the *hudud* punishments.

Furthermore, Islahi also says in his introduction that while the Muslims were in Mecca they could not experience any form of social organization (*ijtima'i tanzim*, *ibid*) but had to live their faith as individuals. He claims that laws and regulations were revealed only in Medina for the purpose of social organization and reform. Such an assertion disregards the fact that the Muslims experienced social cohesion as a separate community in Mecca and were considered as such by the Quraysh. Already in Mecca, the Muslims had their own laws for marriage and inheritance, murder, adultery and the use of alcohol. Even Islahi acknowledges that they were a separate community because they had their own direction for prayer (*qibla*). In fact, in Mecca, the Muslims enjoyed every form of social organization except in matters related to power and politics.

Besides, it is incorrect to say that the Jews could approach either the Islamic or the Jewish law courts (*yahud ki 'adalaton mein*, *ibid*, p. 423). In fact, all members of Islamic society in Medina came to the Prophet (peace be upon him) for the final verdict. The Constitution of Medina makes this quite clear.¹⁶⁹

Islahi's claim that all other religions were excluded from the land of Arabia does not take account of the fact that other religious groups were well respected in Arabia for several hundred years after the advent of Islam. Islahi's view seems to be based on a misunderstanding of a *hadith* to this effect. He should have clarified that, after the conquest of Mecca, there would be only one *political* power in the land.

¹⁶⁹ "Whenever among the people of this document there occurs any incident (disturbance) or quarrel from which disaster for it (the people) is to be feared, it is to be referred to God and to Muhammad, the Messenger of God (God bless and preserve him)." Watt (1968), p. 224, no. 42.

Islahi explains that the “blessed tree” of verse 35 is fruitful because it is sheltered from the heat of the sun. This is a scientific explanation that neither appreciates the symbolic character of the parable nor recognizes the fact that trees need sunlight. Islahi also finds a link between verse 35 of this Surah and verses 142-143 of Surah *Al Baqarah*, confirming his view that the Jews and the Christians were excluded from membership of the “community of the middle way” (cf. *ibid*, p. 411). The reference to *direction* in these verses, however, is precisely to emphasize the fact that the quality of a tree does not depend on the direction in which it is facing. God’s guidance is for everyone as verse 142 of Surah *Al Baqarah* says:

Say: “God’s is the east and the west; He guides whom He wills onto a straight way”.

Islahi has tried to find specific meanings for these verses that totally miss the point.

Based on several verses of this Surah but more especially on his understanding of verse 55, Islahi stresses the victory of Islam *in this world* and the prosperity that is promised to believers *in this life (is dunya mein ghalba lazmi hai, ibid, p. 426)*. He gives explicit mention to political leadership as well as to the laws, political system and security implied by the victory of Islam in Mecca (*fath makka, ibid, p.427*). It is not clear how Islahi derives all these details from the text of the Surah itself.

Islahi refers to the context – external to the Surah – by using phrases such as: *waqt ke khas halat ke mutabiq (ibid, p. 355)*, *ab maujuda zamane mein (ibid, p. 362)*, *mauqa’ o mahal (ibid, p. 367)*, *zamana jahiliyat ki sosaiti mein (ibid, p. 390)* and *islam ke daur mein (ibid, p. 403)*. He also says that verse 35 of this Surah is an allusion to the debates of the Jews and the Christians over the direction of prayer (*in alfaz mein ek latif talmih, ibid, p. 411*) but does not provide objective evidence for this observation. In fact, all his references to the external context are derived from his own perception of the text itself.

Islahi describes the machinations of the hypocrites (*munaafikin*) and the Jews (*yahud ka hal*) and claims that their state was worse than that of the Arabs before the coming of Islam. On the contrary, one could argue the state of the unbelieving Arabs in pre-Islamic society was far worse than that of the Jews. Moreover, there is no evidence for Islahi’s claim that these machinations caused weaknesses among the Muslims (*sakht qism ki kamzauryan, ibid, p. 377*) or for his view that the Jews were irritated by the Muslims’ prestige (*yahud par ye bat bahut shaq thiy, ibid, p. 386*) so that they began to plot

revenge (*intiqam lene ki tadbir*, *ibid*). All these observations are based on Islahi's own intuitive perception about the state of affairs during the time of revelation.

Islahi devotes a disproportionate amount of space (13 pages) to discussing verse 2 of the present Surah. Punishment for the adulterer and adulteress is obviously a topic of great importance to him. He does not clarify that it was *the punishment of stoning (rajm)* that the Jews implemented only against a poor person for they did perform flogging on every person who committed adultery. It is in the course of this discussion that Islahi quotes two complete paragraphs from what he had written in relation to verses 33-34 of Surah *Al Maidah* (vol. 2, pp. 368-369). Ultimately, Islahi argues that the punishment stipulated by verse 2 of Surah *An Nur* is warranted because of the social disorder caused by adultery. He also says that verse 33 of Surah *Al Maidah* had already justified such punishment.¹⁷⁰

Islahi quotes several *ahadith* and traditions that support his view about punishment for adulterers (cf. vol. 5, p. 366-373). It is remarkable that Islahi provides so many *ahadith* to confirm his views on adultery since it is not his custom to make much use of the *ahadith* in his commentary. The only further reference to traditions of any kind in this Surah occurs in his discussion of verse 33, which concerns marriage and slavery. In that context, he refers to several other traditions (*riwayat*, cf. *ibid*, p. 402 and *ahadith*, cf. *ibid*, p. 403).

Furthermore, in this Surah, Islahi makes reference to modern ways of thinking (*ab maujuda zamane mein to ye mustaqil falsafa ban gaya hai*, *ibid*, p. 362). He comments on a number of issues such as adultery, the media, fashion, Islamic Dress Code for women, modern displays of jewelry and Islamic punishments. Islahi is very critical of his own country (*ap apne hi mulk ko lijiye*, *ibid*). In these comments, Islahi has become a commentator on modern life rather than an exegete of the Qur'an.

Finally, Islahi idealizes Islamic society as it was in Medina and sees it as a blue print for all Islamic societies. Hence, verse 31 is addressed to the

¹⁷⁰ Islahi does not show the same concern that Abdullah Saeed does to explain these punishments in a contemporary context. Saeed says that "the measure itself, whether amputation, flogging or execution, does not appear to be the *primary* objective of the Qur'an in relation to these crimes. What is more important from its point of view is avoidance of the crime in the first place, and then repentance if a crime is committed." Saeed (2006), p. 136. Saeed goes on to say that, even at the time of the Companions, "there was some scope for *ijtihad* in applying the Qur'anic injunctions on *hadd*". *Ibid*.

whole of Islamic society (*pure muslim mu'sharah ki islah o tathir ke liye di gayi hai is wajh se sab ko khitaab kar ke*, *ibid*, p. 399). Islahi seems to be saying that the verse can be understood and applied by all Muslims of every period and culture without further considerations.¹⁷¹ Furthermore, in the five conditions Islahi lays down for the implementation of Islamic punishments, his reflections move from the particular situation of Medina to the present time, without making any allowances for changes that may have occurred in the social, political and cultural context.¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ Similarly, Islahi constantly refers to the whole of Islamic society in his discussion of verses 32-33 (cf. *ibid*, pp. 400-403).

¹⁷² Islahi makes similar general statements about Islam and Muslims in Surah *Al Hajj*. Cf. my *conclusions*.

General Introduction to Surah Group Four

The fourth Surah Group starts with Surah *Al Furqan* and consists of eight Surahs. The first seven Surahs of this Surah Group are Meccan and the last Surah of the Group, Surah *Al Ahzab*, is a Medinan Surah. The same rule of Surah pairs applies to this Surah Group as for former Surah Groups.

The last Surah of the former Surah Group, Surah *An Nur*, was a summary. Likewise, the last Surah of this Surah Group also has the nature of a summary or complement (*takmila wa tamtamah*, vol. 5, p. 439). This Surah Group discusses the three periods in the rise of Islam (*islami da'wat*, *ibid*), namely, invitation, migration and expansion (*da'wat*, *hijrat*, *jihad*, *ibid*), as well as basic teachings concerning the unity of God, prophethood and life after death (*tauhid*, *risalat*, *ma'ad*, *ibid*). However, Surah Group Four has its own characteristic style and way of presenting the subject matter (*uslub*, *andaz aur mawad istadlal*, *ibid*).

The main theme (*'umud*) of the whole of Surah Group Four consists of proofs for prophethood (*is grup ka jama' 'umud sabat-i-risalat*, *ibid*). The Surah Group describes the various ways the Quraysh gave expression to their objections and to their doubts about the genuineness of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and about the revelation of the Qur'an. The Surahs in this Surah Group use a variety of styles to provide various answers to objections concerning these questions and to establish the nature and authenticity of the Qur'an (*quran ka asl martaba o maqam*, *ibid*).

In this way, the good news of victory and prosperity in this world and in the next – after enduring many trials – is announced to those who believe in the message of the Qur'an (*dunya aur akhirat donon mein, fauz o falah ki basharat*, *ibid*). In contrast to this good news, the Surah Group also presents the consequences of persisting in disbelief even after the arguments for belief in the message of the Qur'an have been made perfectly clear (*itmam-i-hujjat ke ba'd*, *ibid*).

Surah Al Furqan

Introduction

Islahi says that the 'umud of the Surah concerns the defense of the Qur'an and of the Prophet (*is surah ka 'umud quran aur nabi salla allahu alayhi wa sallam ka difa'a hai*, ibid, vol. 5, p. 439). The Surah relates the objections and the doubts that the opponents had about the Qur'an and about the Prophet and makes a response to these matters. The Surah also brings out the underlying reasons (*asal muharrikat*, ibid) for the objections of the opponents and clarifies those things that caused them most aversion, such as the message of unity and the warning about punishment (*da'wat-i-tauhid ya inzar-i-'azab*, ibid, p. 440).

The Theme of the Surah

Islahi accuses the leaders of the Quraysh of trying to reduce the status of the Qur'an from that of a heavenly book (*kitab-i-asmani hone ka tasawwur*, ibid, p. 445) to an expression of poetry (*'ala sha'iron ya zaurdar khatibon ka kalam*, ibid). As verse 4 says:

Moreover, those who are bent on denying the truth are wont to say, "This (Qur'an) is nothing but a lie which he (himself) has devised with the help of other people, who thereupon have perverted the truth and brought a falsehood into being."

The leaders of the Quraysh (*quraysh ke lidaron*, ibid) tried to deceive the people by claiming that the Qur'an was merely the work of the Prophet, which he attributed to God. In this way, they tried to destroy both the Prophet's claim to being a messenger of God and the divine origin of the Qur'an (*anhazrat salla allahu alayhi wa sallam ke da'we risalat aur quran ke wahi ilahi hone*, ibid). They also said that others had helped the Prophet to produce the Qur'an because the Prophet could not have had access to the history of the Prophets contained in the Qur'an without the help of others (*is kitab ki tasnif mein kuch dusre logon ke zahn bhi muhammad salla allahu alayhi wa sallam ke sath sharik hain*, ibid).

The Surah also responds to questions about the dignity of a prophet. Verse 7 had asked:

What sort of apostle is this (man) who eats food (like all other mortals) and goes about in the market-places?

Islahi finds a response to this question in verse 20:

We never sent as Our message-bearers any but (mortal men,) who indeed ate food (like other human beings) and went about in the market-places.

Islahi concludes that the ordinary activities of a human being do no lessen the status of prophet hood (*mansub-i-risalat ke munafi nahin hai*, ibid, p. 457). Islahi alludes to the fact that the Qur'an encourages those who are not aware of the nature of prophet hood to seek information from the People of the Book (*agar tum nubuwwat o risalat ki tarikh se bekhavar ho*, ibid, p. 458).

Furthermore, Islahi finds that verse 33 is a defense of the status of prophet hood:

And (that) they (who deny the truth) might never taunt thee with any deceptive half-truth without Our conveying to thee the (full) truth and (providing thee) with the best explanation.

God gave the Prophet everything he needed to exercise his prophet hood (*nubuwwat o risalat*, ibid, p. 464). The Prophet's own desires did not play any part in his mission and God himself takes responsibility to defend his Prophet from the attacks of his enemies (*agar mukhalifin ke in tamam hamlon ki mudafa'at ki zimmadari allah ta'ala apne upar na lete*, ibid). Finally, the plural of the word for "prophet" in verse 37 indicates that rejection of one prophet implies a rejection of them all (*ek ka inkar sab ka inkar hai*, ibid, p. 467).

External Sources

The Qur'an is authentic and self-explanatory. Islahi dismisses the need for arguments based on external evidence to provide a foundation for the authenticity of the Qur'an (*ye kitab apne da'wi aur apne pesh karne wale ki sadaqat ko sabit karne ke liye bajae khud dalil o hujjat hai. ye kisi khariji dalil ki muhtaj nahin hai*, ibid, p. 443). Islahi draws this conclusion from the first verse of the Surah:

Hallowed is He who from on high, step by step, has bestowed upon His servant the standard by which to discern the true from the false, so that to all the world it might be a warning.

Islahi expects the believer to receive the gift of the Qur'an instead of taking steps to destroy it (*aisi chizon ka matalbah karen jo in ke liye khair ke bajae tabahi ka ba'is hon*, ibid). The demands (*mutalbah*) that Islahi is referring to are the objections and conditions that the rich people of Mecca and Taif were placing before the Prophet instead of simply accepting the revelation of

the Qur'an (*ye e'tirazat ziyadatar makka aur taif ke daulatmandon ke uthae hue they*, ibid). Islahi says that the first verse of this Surah provides the Prophet with everything he needs to accept the message of the Qur'an without having recourse to further proofs or evidence (*allah ta'ala ne apne bandah khas par furqan ki shakl mein jo ni'mat-i-'azma utari hai is ke ba'd wo kisi chiz ka muhtaj nahin hai*, ibid).

Even material or evidence obtained from historical documents cannot replace the simple trust in God required to accept the revelation of the Qur'an. Islahi says that the Qur'an should be given preference over books of history (*asli e'timad allah ta'ala ki kitab par hona cahiye na ke tarikh ki kitabon par*, ibid, p. 468). Only books of history that confirm the message of the Qur'an may be useful. However, the Prophets did not limit themselves to quoting rules and principles in their efforts to convince the people of God's message but also provided history and parables to clarify their message (*tamsilat aur tarikh ke ahwal o waq'e'at se in ko achhi tarah mudallal o mubarhan bhi kar dia*, ibid, p. 469). Hence, history and parables have their own role in understanding the Qur'an.

In fact, Islahi says that proverbs and events (*amsal o waq'e'at*, ibid) were used extensively by the Prophets to convey their message (*yahi tariqa tamam rasulon ne ikhtiyar farmaya*, ibid). Islahi says that there is no acceptable excuse for any reasonable person to reject the proverbs and events that the Prophets used (*amsal o waq'e'at se is tarah wazeh kar di jati hai ke ek hath dharm ke siwa koi in ka inkar nahin kar sakta*, ibid). Those who do reject these illustrations and arguments of the Prophets are unreasonable people who accept only those things that they can see with their physical eyes (*wo log 'aql o dil se samajhne wale log nahin they balke sab kuch ankhone se dekh kar manane wale they*, ibid). Islahi implies that a reasonable person is one who does not limit himself to an external view of things but who uses his intellect and his intuition (*'aql o dil se samajhne wale log*, ibid).

In fact, the Qur'an makes abundant use of signs and symbols to express its message (*itni nishaniyan maujud hain ke quran ki har bat ko sabit karne ke liye wo kafi hain*, ibid, p. 475). Islahi says that these signs will be effective only for people who are willing to use their mind and to accept the lessons and guidance it provides (*lekin ye nishaniyan in ke liye nafa'a hain jin ke andar sochne samajhne aur 'ibrat o nasihat hasil karne ka iradah paya jata ho*, ibid).

The Social Context

Islahi says that the Surah describes the situation of the leaders of the Quraysh (*quraysh ke lidaron*, ibid, p. 445) who were intent on provoking suspicion about the Qur'an and about the Prophet among the people (*ye mukhalifin ke wo aqwal naql ho rahe hain jo quran aur penghambar salla allahu alayhi wa sallam se logon ko bad guman karne ke liye wo phailate hain*, ibid) and it describes the efforts that the Quraysh were making to lead the people astray (*quraysh ne is mubham ilzam se apne 'awam ko ye taussur dene ki koshish ki*, ibid, p. 446). Because of their arrogance, the Quraysh rejected the history related in the Qur'an (*is ki zid bara-i-rast mutarizin quraysh ke ghurur par parti thiy*, ibid, p. 447).

The Qur'an uses the word "criminal" (*mujrimin*, ibid, p. 462) in reference to these leaders (*ye lafz in gumrah karne wale lidaron ke liye ist'emal hua hai*, ibid), who were spreading false propaganda among the people (*propaganda*, ibid). Hence, the warning given in the Qur'an is primarily directed at the Quraysh (*quraysh ko ye tanbih hai*, ibid, p. 467). If they behave in the way that Pharaoh and his people did, the Quraysh will experience the same fate (ibid). Islahi uses the very same words to express this warning to the Quraysh as he had used in the previous Surah Group.

Besides the verses directed more specifically to the leaders of the Quraysh, Islahi considers verse 45 to be directed to a wider audience:

Art thou not aware of thy Sustainer (through His works)? – how He causes the shadow to lengthen (towards the night) when, had He so willed, He could indeed have made it stand still: but then, We have made the sun its guide.

Islahi says that the phrase "art thou not aware" is addressed individually to each and every person (*khitab yahan fardan fardan har mukhatab se hai*, ibid, p. 474). Similarly, verse 50:

And, indeed, many times have We repeated (all) this unto men, so that they might take it to heart: but most men refuse to be aught but ingrate,

is addressed to every level of society (*mukhatab qaum ke har tabqah aur har groh*, ibid, p. 477). The message was not limited to any one particular group (*ye nahin hua hai ke tabligh o ta'lim ki ye jiddo jahd kisi khas groh hi ke andar mahdud rahi ho*, ibid).

Moreover, the phrase from verse 59:

Ask, then, about Him, (the) One who is (truly) aware, is addressed to all those people just mentioned (*khitab 'am mukhatabon se hai*, *ibid*, p. 481). Again, verse 63 describes the attitude of all people who submit to God:

For, (true) servants of the Most Gracious are (only) they who walk gently on earth, and who, whenever the foolish address them, reply with (words of) peace.

The purpose of this verse is to present the Quraysh and the Muslims (*musalmanon par bhi*) with a mirror by means of which they can compare themselves with human nature as it should be (*maqsud ek tarif to mutarizin quraysh ke samne ek aisa aina rakh dena hai jo in ke age insaniyat ke asli husn o jamal ko beniqab kar de*, *ibid*, p. 486). Islahi explains the verse by using words that encompass all people (*insan, ek shakhs, kisi se*, *ibid*) but sets the verse in the historical context of the ridicule that the Prophet had to undergo.

The cultural context presents itself in Islahi's reference to the literature of the Arabs where we find references to the Most Gracious (*in ke litrichar mein allah aur rahman donon nam milte hain*, *ibid*, p. 481). Moreover, Islahi's explanation of verse 60 is based on an analysis of Arab customs:

Yet when they (who are bent on denying the truth) are told, "Prostrate yourselves before the Most Gracious," they are wont to ask, "And (who and) what is the Most Gracious? Are we to prostrate ourselves before whatever thou biddest us (to worship)?" – and so (thy call) but increases their aversion.

Islahi says that the Arabs felt the People of the Book were trying to impose their own ways onto them (*apne dini tasawwurat ko musallat karna chahte hain*, *ibid*, p. 482) and that the use of this name for God (*rahman*) was a very provocative and emotional issue (*is se qaumi aur mazhabi donon hi qism ke jazbat mein ishte'al paida hota hai*, *ibid*). But this verse is telling the Arabs that the name "Most Gracious" (*rahman*) contains rich blessings (*beshumar barkaton aur rahmaton ka khazana hai*, *ibid*, p. 482). The conclusion is that verse 60 cannot be understood without some knowledge of the socio-cultural and religious context of society at the time of revelation.

Different Kinds of Language

In the introduction to this Surah Group, Islahi says that the main difference between this Surah Group and the previous one is the style and manner of presenting the arguments (*uslub, andaz aur mawad istadlal*, *ibid*, p. 439).

Apart from a passing reference to the expression of surprise in verse 3 (*is mein izhar-i-ta'ajjub ka mazmun bhi muzmar hai*, ibid, p. 445), Islahi's first reference to the question of style is in connection with the words of verse 7:

Yet they say: "What sort of apostle is this (man) who eats food (like all other mortals) and goes about in the market places? What has not an angel (visibly) been sent down unto him, to act as a warner together with him?"

Islahi recognizes that this verse expresses more than just a simple question because the words express both astonishment and mockery (*ista'ajab aur tanz o istehza*, ibid, p. 448). Similarly, verse 59 is not simply a numerical statement about six aeons:

He who has created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in six aeons, and is established on the throne of His almightiness: the Most Gracious! Ask, then, about Him, (the) One who is (truly) aware.

The verse expresses the fact that this universe did not come about by accident (*is mein is haqiqat ki taraf isharah hai ke ye kainat kisi ittifaqi hadsa ke taur par nahin a gayi*, ibid, p. 480). Islahi's conclusion is based on the sign value of the language (*is mein is haqiqat ki taraf isharah hai*, ibid).

Islahi explains that verse 40 refers to an interior way of seeing that leads to faith:

And they (who now deny Our messages) must surely have come across that town which was rained upon by a rain of evil: have they, then, never beheld it (with their mind's eye)? But nay, they would not believe in resurrection!

There were plenty of ruins to be seen along the way that the merchants took (*is basti par se to ye aye din apne tijarati safaron mein guzarte hain! kiya is ke asar bhi ye nahin dekhte rahe hain!* ibid, p. 469). Despite seeing these ruins, however, the merchants remain blind to the reality of life after death (*sab kuch dekhne ke bawajud andhe bane hue hain*, ibid). Islahi adds that the Quraysh must have seen the ruins left by the people of Lot (ibid) but they did not have the eyes of faith that leads to knowledge of the life to come (*ankhon ke andar basirat akhirat ke tasawwur se paida hoti hai*, ibid, p. 470). Islahi is clearly using figurative language to express the meaning of the verses.

However, Islahi categorically denies that the reference to cattle in verse 44 is an exaggerated expression:

Or dost thou think that most of them listen (to thy message) and use their reason? Nay, they are but like cattle – nay, they are even less conscious of the right way!

Islahi says that the comparison of men with cattle in this verse is no exaggeration but is a statement of fact (*ye koi mubalaghah ka uslub-i-bayan nahin hai balke bayan haqiqat hai*, *ibid*, p. 471). In this case, Islahi refuses to accept that the verse uses hyperbole to express the meaning. However, a statement of fact is also a style of expression that need to be understood by a person with the right disposition of heart.

On the other hand, Islahi refers to various styles and expressions to describe the image of hell (*ye taswir hai*, *ibid*, p. 454). Verses 12-13 say:

When it shall face them from afar, they will hear its angry roar and its hiss; and when they are flung, linked (all) together, into a tight space within, they will pray for extinction there and then!

Islahi personalizes this image of hell by saying that it “sees” those condemned to it from afar (*in ko dur hi se dekh kar*, *ibid*), takes revenge on the unbelievers (*wo in se intiqam ke josh mein pahle se biphari hui hai*, *ibid*) and roars and hisses like a hungry lion (*is tarah daharegi jis tarah bukha sher daharta hai*, *ibid*). These are descriptions and expressions that appeal to the imagination for their meaning to become clear.

In his discussion of verses that refer to hell in terms of space, Islahi uses language of a physical nature to describe the scene. For instance, verse 13 refers to hell as a “tight space”:

And when they are flung, linked (all) together, into a tight space within, they will pray for extinction there and then!

Islahi describes the way these people will be linked together with actual chains (*ya'ni awwal to jaga tang aur phir is mein bhi wo bandh kar aur zanjiron mein jakar kar dale jayenge*, *ibid*). Islahi has a similar approach to verse 14:

(But they will be told:) “Pray not today for one single extinction, but pray for many extinctions!”

Islahi suggests that this command to pray could be a reference to the actual words spoken by God through a warden of hell to those confined there (*ye bat qaulan bhi ho sakti hai*, *ibid*, p. 455) or could be a reference to the actual situation (*aur surat-i-hal ki ta'bir bhi ho sakti hai*, *ibid*). For Islahi, both alternatives are possible.

Furthermore, Islahi resorts to physical categories to express the meaning of verse 34:

(And so, tell those who are bent on denying the truth that) they who shall be gathered unto hell upon their faces – it is they who (in the life to come) will be worst in station and still farther astray from the path (of truth)!

Islahi says that those condemned to hell will be dragged there in a physical way (*wo log honge jo muhon ke bal ghasit kar dozakh ki taraf le jaye jayenge*, *ibid*, p. 464). He does not discuss whether the image of “dragging” (*ghasitna*) into hell may indicate the spiritual or emotional abasement that takes place. Similarly, with reference to verse 66, he depicts hell as a physical place (*jahanam ek aisi haulnak jaga hai*, *ibid*, p. 487).

The Way of God

Islahi interprets the verses of this Surah according to what happened in the past or what will happen on the last day. Even when Islahi describes God’s action in the present, he means the action of God that is situated at the time of revelation. According to verse 6:

Say (O Muhammad): “He who knows all the mysteries of the heavens and the earth has bestowed from on high this (Qur’an upon me)! Verily, He is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace!”

Islahi says that the verse explains to the Prophet how God, who knows the past, the present and the future, gives people time to change and reform themselves (*jo log tauba o islah karna chahe*, *ibid*, p. 447). Even though God knows all that is happening in the lives of these people, God does not make a final decision about them because they may still accept his guidance and forgiveness (*wo apni rahmat ke sabab se ‘azab mein jaldi nahin karta balke chahta hai ke log hidayat ki rah ikhtiyar karen ta ke is ki maghfarat ke sazawar hon*, *ibid*, p. 448). Islahi uses the phrase “the way of God” (*sunnat-i-ilahi*) to describe the opportunity (*muhlat*) given to the sinner to seek reconciliation with God (*sunnat-i-ilahi . . . is liye ke is dunya mein allah ta’ala ne ahl-i-batil ko bhi ek had-i-khas tak zaur azmai ki muhlat di hai*, *ibid*, p. 462). Islahi says that he frequently uses this concept of “the way of God” and refers the reader to verse 113 of Surah *Al An’am* (*ibid*).¹⁷³

¹⁷³ Islahi uses the same concept, for instance, to explain verse 30 of the present Surah (*ye is sunnat-i-ilahi ki taraf isharah hai*, *ibid*, p. 459) and again for verse 38 (*sunnat-i-ilahi ke mutabiq mustahiq ‘azab tahri*, *ibid*, p. 468) and for verse 39 (*sunnat-i-ilahi jaisa ke ham jagah jagah wazahat karte a rahe hain*, *ibid*, p. 469) and for verse 77 (*yahan is sunnat-i-ilahi ko yad rake*, *ibid*, p. 491).

Furthermore, Islahi is concerned to explain how the final and irrevocable decision has already come upon certain nations and peoples in the past. He concludes that the punishment of God came upon these nations because they refused to submit to God despite the clear evidence that was presented to them. God did not punish these people until he had provided sufficient evidence and proof that the message of the Prophets was true and worthy of acceptance. As the phrase from verse 19 says:

And now. . . you can neither ward off (your punishment) nor obtain any succour!

Islahi says the phrase refers to the crucial moment when the evidence for faith has been presented in full (*itmam-i-hujjat*) and there is nothing more these people can do to escape the punishment they deserve (*itmam-i-hujjat aur qata'i 'azar ke ba'd tumhare liye koi rah-i-firar baqi na rah jayegi*, *ibid*, p. 457). Islahi says that verses 27-29 refer to a similar situation in which the evildoer finds himself without any way to avoid the punishment that he deserves:

Indeed, he led me astray from the remembrance (of God) after it had come unto me!

By using the same concept (*itmam-i-hujjat*, p. 461), Islahi explains how the evildoer in these verses has no way of escape.

Conclusions

The Qur'an is a heavenly book (*kitab-i-asmani hone ka tasawwur*, ibid, p. 445), which was not the work of the Prophet (peace be upon him) or of any other human agent. It is, therefore, authentic and self-explanatory, needing no external evidence to provide a foundation for its authenticity (*kisi khariji dalil ki muhtaj nahin hai*, ibid, p. 443). However, to understand the Qur'an, the reader does have recourse to factors external to the Qur'an, such as the context or the environment in which it was revealed and in which it is read today. Islahi does not distinguish sufficiently clearly between the *authenticity* of the Qur'an – which does not depend on external evidence – and the *interpretation* of the Qur'an, for which one does turn to external evidence.

It seems to me that Islahi plays down the external evidence because his starting point for understanding the Qur'an is his perception of the text. He refers to the external context only insofar as it enables him to confirm his formulation of the theme (*'umud*). The verses of Surah *Al Furqan* that stress the authenticity of the Qur'an prompt Islahi to dismiss any external evidence to understand the Qur'an that does not conform to his idea of the theme. For example, he turns to the literature of the Arabs (*in ke litrichar mein*, ibid, p. 481) and to their cultural and religious feelings (*qaumi aur mazhabi donon hi qism ke jazbat mein ishte'al paida hota hai*, ibid) in order to explain the theme of the Surah that he has established earlier.

Islahi identifies various groups that are addressed by the Surah. He says it is directed to the Quraysh (*quraysh ko tanbih hai*, ibid, p. 467) and to every level of society (*mukhatab qaum ke har tabqah aur har groh*, ibid, p. 477) and even to the Muslims themselves (*musalmanon par bhi*, ibid, p. 486). Islahi also uses words that have a more universal scope (such as: *insan, ek shakhs, kisi se*, cf. ibid) to indicate the addressees of the Surah.

Further, since the Prophets themselves used parables, proverbs and the events of history (*tamsilat aur tarikh ke ahwal o waq'e'at*, ibid, p. 469) to convey their message, any reader can derive profit from these illustrations and arguments provided he uses his intellect as well as his intuition (*'aql o dil se samajhne wale log*, ibid). Islahi seems to give full freedom to the reader with the right orientation to interpret the Qur'an (*jin ke andar suchne samajhne aur 'ibrat o nasihat hasil karne ka iradah paya jata ho*, ibid).

However, he never suggests that the reader could dispense with the theme ('*umud*).

The style of expression (*uslub, andaz aur mawad istadlal*, *ibid*, p. 439) is the distinguishing mark of each Surah in the Surah Group. Surah *Ash Shu'ara* differs from the present Surah in the style of expression and in the way in which the argument is presented (*donon ke 'umud mein koi bunyadi farq nahin hai . . . lekin nahj istadlal aur uslub-i-bayan is ka sabiq surah se mukhtalif hai*, *ibid*, p. 495). If the style of the Surah is the distinctive mark of the Surah, one would have expected Islahi to have provided a more systematic investigation into the different styles used.

Surah Ash Shu'ara

Introduction

This Surah forms the second of a pair of Surahs together with Surah *Al Furqan*. For this reason, the theme (*'umud*) of the present Surah does not differ significantly from the previous one. Like the previous Surah, this Surah deals with the prophethood of the Prophet (*risalat*) and the divine origin of the Qur'an (*quran ke kitab ilahi hone ka isbat*, *ibid*, vol. 5, p. 495). The only difference is in the style and manner in which the argument is presented (*nahj istadlal aur uslub-i-bayan*, *ibid*). In addition, whereas the previous Surah gave only brief indications concerning the narratives of the Prophets, the present Surah deals with these narratives in some detail. The Surah strongly rejects the accusation made against the Prophet of being a member of the Quraysh group of soothsayers (*kahin*) and poets (*shay'ir*). According to Islahi, the reason why the refrain: "but, verily, thy Sustainer – He alone – is almighty, a dispenser of grace!" (*wa inna rabbaka lahuwa al 'azizu al rahimu*) is repeated eight times suggests that the Surah is especially addressed to those who were demanding that the Prophet provide a sign of the coming doom (*nishani 'azab ka mutalabah kar rahe they*, *ibid*). In response, the Surah points to the lessons that should be drawn from the historical evidence provided by the fate of unbelievers (*mukazibin ki tarikh*, *ibid*). The people demanding signs are warned that God will punish them in the way God has punished other nations in past history.

The Theme of the Surah

Islahi begins his commentary on the present Surah by saying that if we take a cursory glance at the meaning of this Surah it will become quite clear how its various parts are related to the main theme (*'umud*) and we will notice its overall interconnection and coherence (*is ka majmu'ah rabitah o nazam*, *ibid*). From this introductory statement, it appears that Islahi is approaching his commentary from a particular perspective, namely, from the perspective of the main theme he has already established in his short introduction (above). Hence, with regard to the refrain (cited above), Islahi draws out the meaning that fits his exposition of the theme (*'umud*). The refrain is first mentioned in verses 7-8:

In this, behold, there is a message (unto men), even though most of them will not believe (in it). But, verily thy Sustainer – He alone – is almighty, a dispenser of grace!

Islahi provides an exposition of the “message” of this verse by explaining the word “almighty” (*‘azizu*), which he takes to mean that God has the power to accomplish whatever God wishes (*ghalib, wo jo chahe kar sakta hai*, *ibid*, p. 500). This implies that if God wished to bring down punishment on anyone, there would be no one who could prevent him from doing this (*koi is ki pakr se in ko bacha na sakega*, *ibid*). But the other term mentioned in the same refrain, namely, “dispenser of grace” (*al rahimu*), means that God does not bring immediate punishment on wrongdoers but, instead, gives them the opportunity for reform (*muhlat*, *ibid*). Islahi says that repetition of this refrain reminds those who hear the message of the Qur’an not to abuse God’s generosity and grace by taking God’s forbearance as a justification of their actions (*khuda ki dhil ko apne riwayat ki sehhat o sadaqat ki dalil samajh baithe*, *ibid*), thereby finding an excuse to ridicule those who urge them to repent and to reform (*in logon ka mazaq uraya jinhone in ko islah ki da’wat di*, *ibid*). By understanding the refrain, which is repeated throughout the present Surah, as directed to those who question and ridicule the Prophet and who reject God’s message in the Qur’an, Islahi connects this refrain with the overall theme of the Surah (*‘umud*) and makes the whole Surah an expression of the theme (*‘umud*).

Islahi wants to do the same thing by stressing that God is constantly consoling the Prophet in the face of such ridicule and opposition. In other words, the reason why God revealed the historical narratives of all the Prophets in such detail to the last Prophet was so that he could see his own experience of rejection in the wider perspective of what happened to those who came before him (*is daur ke tamam aham waq’at ki taraf is mein isharah hain. yun to is sarguzasht ka har hissah nabi salla allahu alayhi wa sallam aur ap ke sahabah ke liye bhi sarmayah taskin o tasalli aur ap ke mukhalifin ke liye sabaq amuz hai*, *ibid*). In addition, Islahi says that the theme (*‘umud*) of the Surah is highlighted further by the fact that no miracle would be so effective as to convince those who follow their passions and refuse to use their minds (*surah ke ‘umud ke pahlu se . . . in par koi bare se bara mu’ajazah bhi kuch karigar nahin hota*, *ibid*, pp. 500-501).

Since Islahi refers constantly to the concept of prophethood (*risalat*, *ibid*, p.507) throughout his discussion of this Surah, the prophethood of the last Prophet becomes a theme (*‘umud*) that forms a thematic link between all the

verses of the Surah. He says that verses 10-12 introduce this theme of prophethood:

Hence, (remember how it was) when thy Sustainer summoned Moses:
“Go unto those evildoing people, the people of Pharaoh, who refuse to be conscious of Me!”

Islahi says that these verses refer to the time when God bestowed prophethood on the Prophet Moses (*in ko mansub-i-risalat par sarfraz kar ke*, ibid, p. 506). The phrase from verse 21 is another reference to prophethood:

But (since) then my Sustainer has endowed me with the ability to judge (between right and wrong), and has made me one of His message-bearers.

Islahi highlights the fact that God made Moses a Prophet (*mere rah ne . . . mujhe apne rasulon mein se banaya aur ab main ek rasul ki haisiyat se ap logon ke pas ata hun*, ibid, p. 509). Moreover, Islahi says that verse 23 also concerns the prophethood of Moses:

Said Pharaoh: “And what (and who) is that ‘Sustainer of all the worlds?’”

Pharaoh ridicules the Prophet Moses’ claim to being a prophet (*fir’aun ne . . . hazrat musa ke da’wae risalat ka mazaq urane ki koshish ki*, ibid, . 510). Similarly, Islahi interprets verse 30 as substantiating the claim to prophethood (*khuda ka bheja hua rasul*, ibid, p. 511).

In the closing verses of the present Surah, Islahi comes back to the theme (‘*umud*’) of the Surah, which is the defense of prophethood and the Qur’an. In these final verses, God consoles the Prophet by reminding him that the Qur’an is a heavenly book (*anhazrat salla allahu alayhi wa sallam ko tasalli dete hue farmaya tha ke quran ka kitab ilahi hona bilkul wazeh hai*, ibid, p. 554). Islahi’s conclusion is that the Surah ends by repeating that the Qur’an is truly God’s revealed word and not the result of Satanic or poetic inspiration (*kalam asal ‘umud ki taraf laut aya ke ye quran khuda ka utara hua kalam hai. ye koi shaitani ilqa nahin hai aur na ye koi shay’iri hai*, ibid, p. 554). There is only one purpose in relating all these narratives (*in tamam sar guzashton ke sunane se maqsud ek hi hai*, ibid, p. 546), that is, to present the theme (‘*umud*’) of the Surah.

The Socio-political Context

Islahi begins his discussion of this Surah in the way he began his discussion of the previous Surah by saying that no external evidence is necessary to

establish the authenticity of the Qur'an, for the Qur'an possesses its own inherent power to communicate the truth (*wo apni sehhat o sadaqat ki khud sab se bari dalil hai. kisi khariji shahadat ki muhtaj nahin hai*, ibid, p. 498). However, Islahi does draw on external realities to understand the Qur'an. For instance, he describes the psychological and the political motivation of the Prophet's opponents (*siyasi badgumani*, ibid, p. 512) as a comment on verses 34-35. Moreover, the political nature of the punishment that Pharaoh meted out to the sorcerers who believed in the Prophet Moses is another indication that Islahi considers some of the opposition to be politically motivated (*ye mamlakat ke khilaf tum ne ek sazish ki hai is wajh se main tum ko aur tumhare is groh ko wo saza dunga jo hukumat ke baghiyon ko di jati hai*, ibid, p. 514). The political context is further described in verses 53-56 in terms of the propaganda (*propaganda*, ibid, p. 516) that Pharaoh made to vilify the believers. According to Islahi, even verses 214-215 have a political connotation:

And warn (whomever thou canst reach, beginning with) thy kinsfolk, and spread the wings of thy tenderness over all of the believers who may follow thee.

The Prophet was thus asked to warn his own kinsfolk, who were the religious and political leaders of society at the time (*ahl 'arab ki dini o siyasi peshwai ka mansub hasil tha is wajh se qarabat aur siyasat donon ka taqaza ye tha ke ap in ko ane wale khatre se agah kar den*, ibid, p. 563).

Islahi also analyzes the context from an historical point of view by identifying the people to whom the revelation was first addressed. Thus he says that the Prophet Hud addressed his own people (*apni qaum ke 'ayan o umara ko khitab kar ke*, ibid, p. 536). On the other hand, the last part of verse 173:

and dire is such rain upon all who let themselves be warned (to no avail)

is directed to the Quraysh (*quraysh ke liye inzar tanbih hai*, ibid, p. 549). Islahi makes the historical observation that God always sent messengers to warn people of their wrongdoing but they regularly turned a deaf ear (*ghafilon ne hamesha wohi raush ikhtiyar ki jo qaum hud ne ikhtiyar ki*, ibid, p. 539). Similarly, verses 208-212 are directed to the Quraysh (*ye quraysh ko tanbih hai*, ibid, pp. 561-562).

The final verses of the Surah return directly to the context of opposition that the Prophet was experiencing (*ye sari baten quran ke in mukhalifin ki tardid mein farmai gayi hain*, ibid, p. 565). These verses are a response to the

propaganda some people were making about the Prophet being a soothsayer (*ye propaganda karte they ke ap ek kahin hain*, *ibid*) and were addressed to those who falsely accused the Prophet (*in ilzam lagane walon ko mukhatab kar ke*, *ibid*). Islahi says the final three verses of the Surah are a vindication of the Qur'an in the face of its detractors, the Quraysh (*quraysh . . . an hazrat salla allahu alayhi wa sallam ko shay'ir ya quran ko jo shay'ir kahte they*, *ibid*, p. 566). In addition, Islahi describes the cultural environment by alluding to the importance of poetry in Arabic society (*'arab ki sosaiti mein shay'iri ko bari ahammiyat hasil rahi hai*, *ibid*, p. 567).

With this socio-political and cultural context in mind, Islahi suggests that God constantly consoles the Prophet in the face of ridicule and opposition. He interprets verse 3 in terms of the consolation the Prophet received (*wohi tasalli ka mazmun*, *ibid*, p. 498) because the opponents were ridiculing both the Prophet and the Qur'an (*quran o rasul donon ka unhone mazaq uraya*, *ibid*, p. 499). As verse 3 says:

Wouldst thou, perhaps, torment thyself to death (with grief) because they (who live around thee) refuse to believe (in it)?

Similarly, Islahi says that verses 200-203 are an expression of consolation for the Prophet (*ye an hazrat salla allahu alayhi wa sallam ko tasalli di gayi hai*, *ibid*, p. 560). By understanding so many verses of the Surah as providing consolation for the Prophet in the midst of all the opposition and the rejection he experienced, Islahi finds further evidence to highlight the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah. The concept of consolation (*tasalli*) acts as a bridge linking the last part of the Surah with the opening verses where the theme (*'umud*), namely, the defense of the Prophet and the Qur'an, had been clearly expressed (*age khatimah surah ki ayat hain aur silsilah kalam, surah ki tamhid, ya'ni asl 'umud, se jaur gaya hai wahan an hazrat salla allahu alayhi wa sallam ko tasalli dete hue farmaya tha ke quran ka kitab ilahi hona bilkul wazeh hai*, *ibid*, pp. 553-554). God consoles the Prophet by reminding him of the divine origin of the Qur'an.

Different Kinds of Language

Islahi explains that the expression used in verses 10-11 is an example of a specific style:

Hence, (remember how it was) when thy Sustainer summoned Moses: "Go unto those evildoing people, the people of Pharaoh, who refuse to be conscious of Me!"

Islahi says that the last words of these verses “who refuse to be conscious of Me” express the extreme nature of the oppression caused by Pharaoh (*a la yattaqun ka uslub-i-bayan fir'aun aur is ki qaum ke ghayat darja tughyan o fasad ko zahir kar raha hai*, *ibid*, p. 506).¹⁷⁴ Islahi says that the same style is used in verses 125, 143, 162 and 178 to express similar warnings made by other Prophets for their own people (*ibid*, p. 507). Islahi comments that no further explanation is needed to explain that this style of language is an expression of longing, regret, anger and so on (*is uslub-i-khitab mein hasrat, ghusah, zajr o malamat aur 'azab-i-ilahi ke qurb ki jo wa'id hai wo muhtaj tashrih nahin hai*, *ibid*, p. 507). Similar words in verses 106-108 express a clear warning (*a la yattaqun mein da'wat beandaz-i-inzar o tanbih hai*, *ibid*, p. 531):

When their brother Noah said unto them: “Will you not be conscious of God? Behold, I am an apostle (sent by Him) to you, (and therefore) worthy of your trust: be, then, conscious of God, and pay heed unto me!”

In addition, Islahi says that the last phrase of verse 19 is clearly an expression of the gravity of what the Prophet Moses did (*sangini ke ta'bir ke liye us ne ye ibham ka uslub ikhtiyar kiya*, *ibid*, p. 509).

Moreover, Islahi highlights the gravity of the situation of those who oppose the Prophet and the Qur'an by stressing the proximity of hell (*is din inhen is ke liye koi safar nahin karna parega*, *ibid*, p. 527). As verses 90-91 say:

For, (on that Day,) paradise will be brought within sight of the God-conscious, whereas the blazing fire will be laid open before those who had been lost in grievous error.

Similarly, the questions contained in verses 92-93 are to be understood as actual questions (*is waqt dozakh mein parne walon se kaha jayega*, *ibid*):

And they will be asked: “Where now is all that you were wont to worship instead of God? Can these (things and beings) be of any help to you or to themselves?”

Likewise, the quarrel contained in verses 96-97 is understood by Islahi as an exchange of words that will take place among those in hell (*ye jhagra . . . kufr o shirk ke 'alambardar lidaron aur in ke pairauon mein hoga*, *ibid*, pp. 527-528). For Islahi, all these verses express the actual, physical situation of those who oppose the Prophet and the Qur'an.

¹⁷⁴ Muhammad Asad says: “Zamakhshari and Razi understand this rhetorical question . . . as a statement of fact.” Asad (1983), p. 561, footnote 7.

On the other hand, Islahi says that the style of expression used in verses 69-70 is not simply that of a question (*hazrat ibrahim alayhi assallam ka sawal istifham ki nau'iyat ka nahin*, ibid, p. 522):

And convey unto them the story of Abraham – (how it was) when he asked his father and his people, “What is it that you worship?”

Islahi proceeds to explain that this question is more like a statement rejecting idol worship (ibid). Likewise, the question contained in verses 39-40:

And the people were asked: “Are you all present, so that we might follow (in the footsteps of) the sorcerers if it is they who prevail?”

is not a question at all but an expression of provocation and incitement (*istifhamiyah uslub mein has o tahriz aur tashwiq o targhib ka jo mafhum mazmar hai wo 'arabi ka zauq rakne walon se makhfi nahin hai*, ibid, p. 513). Moreover, the question in verse 204:

Do they, then, (really) wish that Our chastisement be hastened on? is an expression of surprise in the form of a question (*sawal izhar-i-ta'ajjub ke liye hai*, ibid, p. 560). Furthermore, Islahi recognizes a satirical note (*ek makhfi qism ka tanz*, ibid, p. 538) that brings out another aspect of the severity of the people's rejection of the Prophet *Hud* in verse 136:

(But) they answered: “It is all one to us whether thou preachest (something new) or art not of those who (like to) preach.

The people utterly despised the message of their Prophet (*ham to is ko mahz ek khabt o janun samajhte hain*, ibid, p. 538). In short, Islahi describes various styles of expression in the light of the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah.

The Way of God

As in the previous Surah, Islahi frequently refers to the “way of God” (*sunnat-i-ilahi*) to express a recurring pattern that he finds in the Qur'an. In fact, it seems to me that this concept serves to support the main theme (*'umud*) of the entire Surah Group. In the present Surah, Islahi first mentions the concept in the context of another recurring topic, namely, the consolation that God is constantly offering the Prophet by means of the message of revelation. So the Prophet need not be overly concerned about those who reject his message because, according to “the way of God” (*sunnat-i-ilahi*, ibid, p. 499), faith cannot be forced upon anyone. Since faith can only be the result of a free decision (*ma'tabar iman wohi hai jo ikhtiyar o iradah ke sath laya jaye*, ibid), the Prophet should understand that some people would choose not to believe. As verse 4 says:

Had We so willed, We could have sent down unto them a message from the skies, so that their necks would (be forced to) bow down before it in humility.

Islahi refers again to “the way of God” (*sunnat-i-ilahi*) in the context of the historical narratives that should provide sufficient evidence for a person to have faith. But even if a person chooses to reject this abundant evidence, God will give him sufficient time (*muhlat*) to reconsider his decision and to reform his life. Eventually, the time will come when this opportunity will come to an end (*sunnat-i-ilahi ke mutabiq ek waqt khas tak bahr hal in ko bhi muhlat milti hai lekin wo khudae ‘aziz ki pakr se kahan bhag kar ja sakege!* *ibid*, p. 539). Islahi resorts to “the way of God” in his response to verses 155-156, which speak of the time when God will decide to punish evildoers (*is had tak barh jati hai to sunnat-i-ilahi ke bamujib wo ‘azab ki grift mein a jati hai*, *ibid*, p. 545) and in his response to verse 169 (*sunnat-i-ilahi ke mutabiq in par ‘azab bhi lazman ayega*, *ibid*, p. 549). Moreover, the historical narratives in the Qur’an indicate that it is God’s way (*us ki sunnat*, *ibid*, p. 552) to obliterate a people or nation that persistently refuses to obey God. But God never does this without giving sufficient warning, as verses 208-209 say:

And withal, never have We destroyed any community unless it had been warned and reminded: for, never do We wrong (anyone).

To this particular understanding of “the way of God” (*sunnat-i-ilahi*), Islahi joins another concept concerning the abundance of evidence (*itmam-i-hujjat*)¹⁷⁵, which is closely related to “the way of God” because God punishes a nation only after giving complete and abundant proofs of his message (*ye is sunnat-i-ilahi ki yad dahani hai jo allah ta’ala ne qaumon ke ma’amle mein iktiyar farmai hai ke wo ‘adl o rahim hai is wajh se inzar aur itmam-i-hujjat ke baghair wo kisi qaum ko halak nahin karta*, *ibid*, p. 561). Islahi says that the Surah uses the language of these concepts to direct a warning to the Quraysh (*ye quraysh ko tanbih hai ke sunnat-i-ilahi ke mutabiq tazkir ke liye ek manzar a gaya hai*, *ibid*). He describes these concepts in such a way that they form a pattern connecting many verses of the present Surah with the other Surahs of the Surah Group and thereby confirming the accuracy of the overall theme (*‘umud*) that he outlined at the beginning.

¹⁷⁵ Islahi refers to the concept *itmam-i-hujjat* in several other places in his discussion of this Surah. See *ibid*, pp. 508, 523 and 558.

Conclusions

Islahi finds evidence to show that this Surah is coherent (*is ka majmu'ah rabitah o nizam*, ibid, p. 495) by understanding the refrain, which is repeated eight times throughout the Surah, in the light (*is roshni mein*, ibid, p. 501) of the theme ('*umud*). He applies the two main words of this refrain: "almighty" and "dispenser of grace" to the theme concerning the defense of the Qur'an and the prophethood of the last Prophet (peace be upon him). In other words, instead of highlighting the style of the Surah, he discusses it as an aspect of the theme ('*umud*).

Moreover, the refrain is an expression of the style that both Surah *Ash Shu'ara* (Surah Group Four) and Surah *Ar Rahman* (Surah Group Six) have in common. However, Islahi does not discuss how such similarities in style could be a link between the Surahs. For Islahi, the main factor that brings the Surahs together into one Surah Group is their theme ('*umud*).

The concept of consolation (*tasalli*) acts as a bridge linking the last part of the present Surah with its opening verses, in which the theme ('*umud*) had been clearly expressed (*surah ki tamhid, ya'ni asl 'umud, se jaur gaya hai*, ibid, p. 553). For Islahi, the concept of consolation (*tasalli*) is a significant aspect of this Surah and many other Surahs. It could be argued, however, that the Prophets did not need to be consoled since they fully accepted their responsibility. Islahi places too much emphasis on the idea of consolation.

Islahi dismisses the occasions of revelation (*shan-i-nuzul*) and describes the context of the Surah in terms of the political, social, psychological and historical factors that were operative at the time. For instance, he describes the psychological and political motivation of the Prophet's opponents (*siyasi badgumani*, ibid, p. 512) and the political nature of the punishment meted out to the sorcerers (cf. ibid, p. 514). Moreover, verses 214-215 refer to the religious and political leaders of society at that time (*ahl 'arab ki dini o siyasi peshwai ka mansub hasil tha*, ibid, p. 563) and the historical narratives were a warning for the Quraysh (*quraysh ko tanbih hai*, ibid, pp. 561-562). Islahi also alludes to the importance of poetry in Arabic society ('*arab ki sosaiti mein*, ibid, p. 567). Islahi's discussion of all these aspects of the context is a novel approach to understanding the background to the Qur'anic text. However, his observations depend largely on intuition and cannot easily be corroborated by factual evidence.

Surah An Naml

Introduction

The previous Surah clearly stated that the Qur'an is not a book of poetry or magic but is the revealed word of God (*allah ka utara hua kalam hai*, ibid, vol. 5, p. 573). However, those who rejected it at the time of revelation made fun of the warning contained in the Qur'an. These people claimed that they would believe in the message of the Qur'an only when they could actually see the punishments with which it threatened them. But God's wish is that, instead of calling for visible evidence of punishment, these people would learn a lesson from the history of the Prophets and from what happened to those people who rejected them.

The present Surah asserts that God has indeed provided guidance and good news through the Book. However, only those people will believe in it who have a fear of the Last Day in their hearts (*akhirat ka khauf*, ibid). On the other hand, those people caught up in the pleasures of this world will not be able to abandon their preoccupations (*mashaghil*, ibid). The attractions and enticements that have enslaved them will make it impossible for them to respond to any kind of reminder or warning that comes their way.

The previous Surah focused on two of God's attributes, namely, that of "almighty" and of "dispenser of grace" (*'aziz o rahim*, ibid). The present Surah takes two different attributes, namely, "wise" and "all knowing" (*hakim o 'alim*, ibid) and says that the Qur'an is the work of the wise and all knowing God (*ye quran khudae hakim o 'alim ka utara hua hai*, ibid). In other words, all God's actions are based on these two attributes. The Prophet and his followers are expected to place all their trust in their wise and all-knowing Lord (*apne rab-i-hakim o 'alim par*, ibid), trusting that this Lord will make them welcome at the end of their successful lives (*wo in ko achhe anjam se hamkinar karega*, ibid).

The Coherence of the Surah

The narrative concerning the Prophet Moses begins with verse 7. Since the linguistic analysis of this narrative has already been dealt with elsewhere, Islahi limits the present discussion to a clarification of the way the narrative contributes to the coherence of the Surah (*surah ke nazm*, ibid, p. 579). By

the term “coherence”, Islahi refers to the way the Surah is interconnected to form a thematic unity, which finds expression in the theme (*‘umud*). The narrative concerning the Prophet Moses contributes to the thematic unity of the Surah in two ways. Firstly, the narrative strengthens the last Prophet for his own mission by providing him with an account of what one of the Prophets before him had to endure and secondly, it presents arguments that may help to convince his opponents of the authenticity of the Prophet (*ta ke nabi salla allahu alayhi wa sallam ko bhi in ke mushahadat o tajarbat se tamaniyat o sukunat hasil ho aur ap ke mutarizin o mukhalifin par bhi in ki hujjat qaim ho sake*, *ibid*, p. 580). Islahi says that, of all the Prophets, the Prophet Moses most resembles the last Prophet since Moses also had to experience a people who were his adversaries (*in par iman ki mudda’i ek qaum bhi maujud thi*, *ibid*). For this reason, the narrative describes the conditions and experiences of the Prophet Moses in some detail so that the last Prophet would obtain the maximum support (*sab se ziyadah taskin bakhsh ho sakte they*, *ibid*) and, at the same time, offer a valuable lesson for his adversaries (*mukhalafin ke liye bhi sab se ziyadah sabaq amuz ho sakte they*, *ibid*).

The Surah presents the narrative of the Prophet *Salih* for a similar reason; namely, to strengthen the last Prophet in his mission by reminding him of the difficulties his predecessor had to endure. As the enemies of the Prophet *Salih* say in verse 49:

Indeed, we shall certainly fall upon him and his household by night (and slay them all); and then we shall boldly say to his next of kin, ‘We did not witness the destruction of his household – and, behold, we are indeed men of truth!’”

Islahi says this account of the Prophet *Salih* was told with a purpose (*anhazrat salla allahu alayhi wa sallam ko is liye sunaya gaya hai ke tumhare mu’anid ashraf bhi isi qism ki sazishen kar rahe hain ya karenge lekin jis tarah allah ne hazrat salih aur in ke sathiyon ki hifazat farmai isi tarah wo tumhari aur tumhare sathiyon ki bhi hifazat farmayega*, *ibid*, p. 613). The purpose is to console the last Prophet and his disciples with the example of the way God protected the Prophet *Salih* and his disciples from the intrigues of their opponents.

Islahi has argued that the main purpose of the prophetic narratives is to illustrate the concept of prophethood. He proceeds to develop the concept of prophethood further by making various observations that arise from his own reflections. He says that, whereas the poets and soothsayers of Arab society

took pains to acquire and to practice their art, God's prophet neither desires nor learns how to be a prophet for it is bestowed upon him by God (*nubuwwat o risalat ek khas mauhibat-i-rabani aur fazal-i-yazdani hai*, ibid). Moreover, it is God who trains and forms the prophet (*nabi o rasul ki tarbiyat allah ta'ala khud apni nigrani mein karta hai*, ibid). Furthermore, a prophet does not become someone's disciple nor does prophethood arise out of a prophet's own thinking process but God prepares a prophet by means of the vicissitudes of life for the special task entrusted to him (*is ko is kar-i-khas ke liye taiyar karta hai jo is ke supurd kiya jata hai*, ibid). All these observations of Islahi develop the main theme (*'umud*) of prophethood.

Another example of the way Islahi applies the concept of coherence (*nazm*) to an interpretation of the Surah is to be found in his comment on verse 82:

Now, (as for the deaf and blind of heart -) when the word (of truth) stands revealed against them, We shall bring forth unto them out of the earth a creature which will tell them that mankind had no real faith in Our messages.

Islahi says that many past commentators have devised all kinds of strange ways of describing the "creature" mentioned in this verse. According to Islahi, we can obtain some understanding of what is meant by this "creature", not from the actual verse in which it occurs but from a consideration of the coherence of the Qur'an (*nazm*) and from the words and their Qur'anic parallels (*quran ke alfaz, nizam aur is ke nazair*, ibid, p. 635). Islahi suggests we look at the overall theme (*'umud*) or context of the Surah rather than focus on this particular word "creature". With this approach, Islahi can conclude that the word "creature" refers to the signs of the coming Day of Judgment contained in the narratives (*asar-i-qayamat ki riwayat*, ibid). But Islahi says these narratives should be subjected to *hadith* criticism (*naqd-i-hadis ki kasuti par rakh kar dijiye*, ibid), suggesting that he is referring, not to the narratives contained in the Qur'an, but to narratives external to the Qur'an.

A further reference to the overall theme of the Surah Group occurs in verses 76-78, which according to Islahi, refer to the way the children of Israel supported the Quraysh against the Prophet. Later Surahs in Surah Group Four will provide the details that are not afforded here (*ye ijmal tafsil ka rang ikhtiyar karega*, ibid, p. 631).

The Social Context

With regard to external criteria to understand the Qur'an, Islahi makes the same observation that he did for the previous Surah. As the first verse says:

These are messages of the Qur'an – a divine writ clear in itself and clearly showing the truth.

Islahi says that no external evidence, such as miracles or signs, is necessary to establish the truth of the Qur'an (*is ki sehat o sadaqat ko janchne ke liye kisi khariji shahadat aur kisi mau'jizah o nishani ki zarurat nahin hai*, p. 576). The Qur'an proclaims its own authenticity in the face of the opposition and mockery directed at it (*ye sifat yahan is ke in mutarizin o mukhalafin ko samne rakh kar layi gayi hai*, *ibid*).

The thematic unity of the Surah (*surah ke nizam*, *ibid*, p. 579) suggests that the Quraysh were people who opposed the Prophet. Islahi says that verses 45-57 were revealed so that the Quraysh would not consider these prophetic narratives as referring only to distant peoples and nations (*ta ke quraysh na samjhe ke ye dur ke mulkon . . . ke waq'e'at hain. balke khud apne mulk ke andar ki in qaumon ke anjam se bhi sabaq len*, *ibid*, p. 608). In fact, this narrative and the other narratives that appear in this Surah all address those who opposed the Prophet (*mukhatab agarche nabi salla allahu alayhi wa sallam hi hain lekin rue sakhan mukhalafin ki taraf hai*, *ibid*, 580).

In addition to naming the addressees, Islahi describes the social and the cultural background of the Surah. For example, he refers to the splendour of kings at the time of revelation (*is zamane ke badshahon ke takht o taj*, *ibid*, p. 598) and to the common custom of using birds (*parindon se kam lene ka tariqa maujud zamane mein bhi maujud hai aur qadim zamane mein bhi ye paya jata raha hai*, *ibid*, p. 596) to send messages (*parindon ke zari'ah se khutut bhejhne aur bhejhwane ka tariqa is zamane mein*, *ibid*, p. 599). Similarly, Islahi refers to the Arabic way of thinking (*mushrikin 'arab ka mauqif*, *ibid*, p. 628) and to their mental confusion (*zahni uljhan*, *ibid*) in connection with verse 66:

Nay, their knowledge of the life to come stops short of the truth: nay, they are (often) in doubt as to its reality: nay, they are blind to it.

The Purpose of the Narrative

The first historical narrative concerns the Prophet Moses and is related in verses 7-14 of the Surah. The last Prophet is presented with three points that express the purpose and meaning of this narrative (*is sar guzasht ke hawalah se maqsud an hazrat salla allahu alayhi wa sallam ko khas taur par tin baton ki taraf mutawajjeh karna hai*, ibid, pp. 577-578). The three points present a summary of these verses. Islahi lists them as follows:

1. God has provided revelation for the last Prophet just as God provided it for the Prophet Moses. This need disturb neither the Prophet nor anyone else.
2. Just as the people living at the time of the Prophet Moses did not believe even though they witnessed nine miracles, people today will never come to faith by seeing miracles.
3. After the appointed time for reform has run out, God will annihilate those who refuse to believe (*ek khas muddat tak dhil dene ke ba'd lazman fana kar deta hai*, ibid, p. 578).

The specific purpose of this narrative is brought out more clearly in its final verse:

And in their wickedness and self-exaltation they rejected them, although their minds were convinced of their truth: and behold what happened in the end to those spreaders of corruption!

Islahi says that this final verse of the narrative expresses its purpose (*ye akhir mein wo asal mudda'a samne rakh dia gaya hai jis ke liye ye sar guzasht sunai gayi hai*, ibid, p. 584), which is to inform the last Prophet about the kind of people that he must encounter. Since these people will always find an excuse to reject God's messages, they will experience the same fate as Pharaoh and his people (*aise mufsidin ka anjam wohi hota hai jo firaun aur is ki qaum ka hua*, ibid, p. 585).

The overall purpose of the narrative about the Prophet Solomon and Queen of Sheba contained in verses 15-44 of the Surah is clearly articulated by Islahi. The invisible beings (*al jinn*) and birds (*attair*) mentioned in verse 17 are part of a story with an overall purpose, namely, to extol the blessings of God:

And (one day) there were assembled before Solomon his hosts of invisible beings, and of men, and of birds; and then they were led forth in orderly ranks.

Islahi says that the description of this parade of creatures (invisible beings, men and birds) has an overall purpose (*yahan is parade ke zikr se asal mudda'a*, ibid, p. 593). The purpose is to express the Prophet Solomon's own response with a display of the strength and the talents that his army possessed. Instead of boasting of his power and strength, Solomon bowed down before the Lord who had bestowed all these gifts upon him and prayed (*bajae is ke ke in se ghurur aur ghamand mein mubtala hon . . . unhone apna sar nihayat tawaz'u ke sath apne rab ke age jhuka dia*, ibid).

The next event is the encounter with the ants, related in verses 18-19. Islahi links this event with the purpose of the whole narrative, which is to give thanks to God for his greatness, as expressed in the phrase from verse 19:

O my Sustainer! Inspire me so that I may forever be grateful for those blessings of Thine with which Thou hast graced me and my parents.

Islahi understands the encounter with the ants in the context of the whole narrative (*yahan wo asal haqiqat hai jis ke izhar ke liye upar wala waqi'ah bayan farmaya gaya hai*, ibid, p. 595). The basic point of this encounter (*asal haqiqat*) is to express recognition of the fact that all gifts and talents come from God. Such an attitude contrasts with those who boast of their own success (*jab koi kamyabi hasil hoti hai to wo is par itrate aur akarte hain goya unhone koi bara tir mara hai*, ibid) and who, in their pride, misuse these gifts of God (*aur phir is ghurur aur akar ka lazmi natijah ye bhi nikalta hai ke wo khuda ki bakhsi hui ni'maton aur salahiyaton ko khuda ki raza ke kamon mein sarf karne ke bajae shaitan ki maqsud barari mein sarf karte hain*, ibid). It is clear that Islahi highlights the *purpose* of the narrative.

Islahi finds the same basic purpose of the narrative illustrated again in verse 40, which expresses the response of the Prophet Solomon at the way the throne of the Queen of Sheba was brought before him:

And when he saw it truly before him, he exclaimed: "This is (an outcome) of my Sustainer's bounty, to test me as to whether I am grateful or ungrateful! However, he who is grateful (to God) is but grateful for his own good; and he who is ungrateful (should know that), verily, my Sustainer is self-sufficient, most generous in giving!"

Islahi says that, instead of being proud of the way the throne was brought before him, the Prophet Solomon prayed to God in humility (*bajae is ke ke wo is par maghrur hon aur itrayen wo fauran pukar uthe ke ye sab mere rab ka fazal hai*, ibid, p. 604). Islahi understands this as another expression of the basic purpose of the narrative (*ye wo asl mudda'a hai jis ke liye ye*

waqi'ah sunaya gaya hai, ibid). Similarly, Islahi says that the Prophet Solomon had a definite purpose in having the throne brought before him (*takht ke mangwa lene se maqsud mujarrad is ka mangwa lena to tha nahin*, ibid, p. 605). In other words, the bringing of the throne cannot be understood apart from the overall purpose of the story which Islahi summaries at the end of his discussion. He says that the narrative illustrates the different results of arrogance and of humility (*'ulu o istakbar ka anjam kiya hota hai aur shukr guzari o farotani ka silah kiya milta hai*, ibid, p. 608).

Furthermore, various details of these narratives highlight the purpose or theme (*'umud*) of the Surah regarding the special status of a prophet. For instance, the Prophet Solomon actually understood the language of the birds (*hazrat sulaiman ko parindon ki boli ka khas 'ilm de dia*, ibid, p. 593). Similarly, the ants referred to in verse 18 have the ability to speak and they possess certain other characteristics that can be compared with those that human beings also have (*wo sari khususiyat in ke andar bhi payi jati hain jo insanon ke andar payi jati hain*, ibid, p. 595). The Prophet Solomon could actually understand the language of the ants as well (*in hasharat ki awaz bhi sunte aur samajhte they*, ibid). Furthermore, Islahi finds it useful to compare the knowledge of Solomon with the advances of modern science (*wo maujuda zamane ke sainsdanon se bedarjah 'ala tariqa par ye kam lete they*, ibid, p. 596). Finally, the birds in verses 22-24 actually bring back a report to the Prophet Solomon (*tazah tafsili report le kar aya hon*, ibid, p. 597).

Likewise, Islahi understands verse 40 in the light (*is roshni mein*, ibid, p. 578) of the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah:

Answered he who was illumined by revelation: "(Nay,) as for me- I shall bring it to thee ere the twinkling of thy eye ceases!"

According to Islahi, the verse means that the Queen of Sheba's throne is physically brought into the presence of the Prophet Solomon (*itne mein hazrat sulaiman ne dekha ke takht in ke samne maujud hai*, ibid, p. 604). Moreover, the "clear decree" mentioned in verse 75 is a real book (*khuda ke han ek wazeh kitab mein darj hai*, ibid, p. 631) and so is the "creature" mentioned in verse 82 (*wo zamin hi se koi janwar utha khara karega*, ibid, p. 634). Similarly, the evildoers will actually be grouped together in hell (*ye darja bandi in ke juraim ki nau'iyat aur in ki maqdar ke 'itibar se hogi aur . . . dozakh ke alag alag wardon mein bhejh di jayegi*, ibid, p. 635). Islahi stresses the physical aspect of these details in order to bring out the reality of the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah, which is to threaten those who reject the Prophet and who ridicule the Qur'an with dire consequences.

Finally, Islahi understands the action described in verse 88 in a visible, physical way:

And thou wilt see the mountains, which (now) thou deemest so firm, pass away as clouds pass away: a work of God, who has ordered all things to perfection.

Islahi says that this style (*uslub*, *ibid*, p. 638) seems to contrast with the style of Arabic poetry (*shay'ira 'arab*, *ibid*) and it points to the greatness of God's work (*matlab ye hai ke ye is khuda ki karigari hogi*, *ibid*), which can make even the mountains move away like clouds (*wo hawayen urte hue bhi honge*, *ibid*) in keeping with the message of the Qur'an.

The Way of God

Islahi makes use of a concept he calls "the way of God" (*sunnat-i-ilahi*) to establish a thematic connection between various aspects of the Surah and the overall purpose or theme (*'umud*) of the Surah. As verse 4 says:

As for those who will not believe in the life to come – behold, goodly have We made their own doings appear unto them, and so they stumble blindly to and fro.

Islahi says that God allows human beings to be so engrossed in their worldly pursuits that they become unwilling and incapable of breaking away from them (*allah ta'ala in ke 'amal o mashaghil ko is tarah in par musallat kar deta hai ke phir na wo in ke chaurne hi par amadah hote aur na in se chut hi sakte*, *ibid*, p. 577).¹⁷⁶ According to "the way of God" (*sunnat-i-ilahi*), people who stubbornly refuse to respect the natural desire for guidance planted in their hearts will not only fail to receive guidance from God but their hearts will become closed (*sunnat-i-ilahi ye hai ke . . . is ka ye fitri da'iyah bhi murdah ho jata hai*, *ibid*, p. 633).

Islahi develops the concept of "the way of God" (*sunnat-i-ilahi*) to include the notion that trials and difficulties may lead to repentance. In verse 47, the Prophet *Salih* says:

Said he: "Your destiny, good or evil, rests with God: yea, you are people undergoing a test!"

The appearance of God's messengers became a test that was to lead the people to fear and repentance (*rasulon ki ba'asat ke zamane mein aisi*

¹⁷⁶ Islahi says that he has explained the concept of "the way of God" (*jis ki wazahat is kitab mein jagah jagah ho chuki hai*, *ibid*, p. 577).

*azmaishon ka zahur khas taur par hua hai jis se qaum ke andar inabat o khashiyat paida hota hai, ibid, p. 611).*¹⁷⁷ The concept of “the way of God” *sunnat-i-ilahi* also includes the punishment that will be the lot of those who refuse to repent after receiving a complete and clear presentation of the arguments for faith through the preaching of the Prophet (*agar unhone rasul ke bat na mani to in par wo faislah kun ‘azab ajayega jis ki rasul khabar de raha hai, ibid*). Islahi says that after the appointed time (*muhlat, ibid, p. 634*) has elapsed for the presentation of all the arguments for faith (*itmam-i-hujjat*), according to “the way of God”, punishment will be inevitable (*jab itmam-i-hujjat ka ye waqt guzar jayega aur sunnat-i-ilahi ke bamujib in ke liye ‘azab hi ka faislah ho jayega, ibid*).¹⁷⁸

Islahi seems to put all these terms together to form a law of history. He wants to explain the succession of one nation by another according to a law of reward and punishment, which is the result not simply of chance but of the intervention of God (*na ye ittifaq waqe’at hain aur na ye radd o badl karne par khuda ke siwa koi dusra qadir hai, ibid, p. 625*). He says that this is a special warning for the Quraysh (*ye quraysh ko tanbih hai, ibid*) who can see for themselves how past nations have been punished by God (*pichhli qaumon ke asar par ‘ibrat ki nagah dalo to tumhen nazar aye ke allah ke rasul ne in ko jis ‘azab se daraya wo kis tarah in ke samne aya, ibid, p. 629*). However, since the followers of the last Prophet (peace be upon him) put their faith in him, they were not punished (*anhazrat salla allahu alayhi wa sallam ki qaum ki aksariyat iman layi is wajh se is par is qism ka koi ‘azab nahin aya jis qism ka ‘azab pichhli qaumon par aya, ibid, pp. 630-631*). The exception only serves to prove the rule.

¹⁷⁷ Islahi says that the same clarification was made for verse 94 of Surah *Al ‘Araf*: “And never yet have We sent a prophet unto any community without trying its people with misfortune and hardship, so that they might humble themselves”.

¹⁷⁸ Islahi makes frequent reference to this concept of *itmam-i-hujjat* in this Surah. Cf. *ibid*, pp. 616, 623, 631 and 634. The same idea is also developed in other places without explicit use of the term *itmam-i-hujjat*. Cf. *ibid*, pp. 625 and 635.

Conclusions

Islahi understands the various characters and events in the narratives of this Surah according to the overall purpose or intention of the Surah in relating these narratives.

By stressing the significance of the purpose of the various narratives contained in this Surah, Islahi proposes a sound principle of interpretation. However, he identifies the overall purpose or intention of the narratives of a Surah with the theme (*'umud*) that he himself has proposed. For instance, Islahi gives the concept of consolation (*tasalli*) for the Prophet (peace be upon him) such importance that it seems to be the purpose of these narratives. Surely, these narratives were meant more as a *warning* (*inzar*) rather than as consolation (*tasalli*) for the Prophet? Islahi's formulation of the purpose of these events and narratives, therefore, need not be the only correct one.

Islahi provides a coherent perspective for all the details provided in these events and narratives by relating them to the overall purpose for which these narratives were narrated. However, Islahi has not been consistent with this approach to the text of the Qur'an or to the text of the Torah because he often removes details from their narrative sequence and thereby loses the meaning that the context of the narrative provided. I have provided many examples of this tendency in my discussions of the Surahs. In my conclusions for Surah *Al Qasus*, for example, I note that Islahi has taken verses 23-24 (about the women at the well of *Madyan*) out of their narrative sequence in order to make a comment on the way men and women of all times and places should behave in public. Islahi has misunderstood several passages from the former Scriptures by making the same mistake.

Understanding these events and narratives in terms of their overall purpose has made it possible for Islahi to transcend the specific context of the time of revelation and suggest a more universal meaning for these passages. For instance, since the Prophet Solomon's response to the bringing of throne of the Queen of Sheba (cf. verse 40) is seen in the context of the whole narrative, this event illustrates the different results of arrogance and humility (*'ulu o istakbar ka anjam kiya hota hai aur shukr guzari o farotani ka silah kiya milta hai*, *ibid*, p. 608). Islahi's approach to these narratives has brought out their universal meaning.

Surah Al Qasas

Introduction

Since the present Surah is the second of a pair with the previous Surah, there is no basic difference between them with regard to the main theme (*'umud*). The difference consists rather in the way the previous Surah provided a short version whereas the present Surah gives a detailed account. Another difference is the style of expression and the way of presenting the argument (*uslub-i-bayan o naihj istadlal*, *ibid*, vol. 5, p. 643). The previous Surah gave only a summary of those sections of the narrative that concerned the prophethood of Moses and the encounter with Pharaoh (*risalat 'ata kiye jane aur faraun ke pas jane ke hukm se muta'alliq hai*, *ibid*). This Surah, however, relates the whole account in a very detailed way beginning from the birth of Moses through to the bestowal of the Law upon him. Moreover, whereas the previous Surah referred to the Israelites only in a veiled way, the present Surah makes a comparison between the pious and the impious among the Israelites (*salahin o mufasidin*, *ibid*).

The narrative of the Prophet Moses was conveyed to the last Prophet for precisely the same reason that the narrative of the Prophet Joseph was communicated to him (*ba'ainah isi maqsud*, *ibid*). The purpose of the narrative is to provide the last Prophet with a mirror through which he can see how God protects and defends his prophets (*rasulon ki hafazat o siyanat*, *ibid*) and how God provides ways to make the prophets successful in their undertakings (*apni askimon ko barwe kar lane ke liye*, *ibid*). The purpose of the Surah is to inform the Quraysh that just as God sent the Prophet Moses to Pharaoh and to his people, in a similar way God has appointed the Prophet Muhammad to be a messenger to bring a revelation (*kitab*, *ibid*) to the Quraysh. In fact, God has provided them with the message in such a perfectly clear way that no excuse remains for them to continue on the wrong path. The Surah communicates to the Quraysh what happens to those who reject the Prophet's message.

Furthermore, the Israelites are confronted with the fact that if the Prophet Muhammad were not the Prophet sent by God then how could he know all the details of the Prophet Moses' life about which even they were not aware. The Israelites are also challenged with the observation that they have gone astray because they took opposing views regarding the guidance that God

had given to them (*ikhtilafat mein par kar gum kar di*, *ibid*). It is for this reason that God wants to renew his offer of guidance to them through the last Prophet and to provide them with a perfect expression of the argument in favour of believing and accepting the message (*hujjat tamam*, *ibid*).

Finally, the Prophet himself is consoled in this Surah (*tasalli di gai hai*, *ibid*) with the reminder that it was not he who asked God for this Qur'an. On the contrary, since it is God who gives the Prophet the responsibility to convey the message contained in the Qur'an (*is ki zimmahdarian dali hain*, *ibid*, p. 644), the Prophet should not be overly concerned about the negative response of his opponents but should concentrate on performing the duty entrusted to him. God will provide all the help the Prophet needs to bring this task to completion (*kamyabi ki manzil par pahunchaega*, *ibid*).

The Purpose of the Narrative

Islahi makes a very significant statement towards the end of his treatment of the present Surah. Commenting on the narrative about *Qarun* in verses 76-84, Islahi says that *Qarun* was not just a person belonging to the time of the Prophet Moses but was a figure or image of *Abu Lahab* who was a contemporary of the last Prophet. Just as *Qarun* was a source of tribulation for Moses and his people (*jis qism ka fitnah hazrat musa ki qaum mein qarun tha*, *ibid*, p. 713) similarly the followers of the last Prophet experienced tribulation because of *Abu Lahab*. Islahi proceeds to make five specific comparisons between *Qarun* and *Abu Lahab* (*donon ki mumasalat ke ba'z pahluon ki taraf ham isharah karenge*, *ibid*, p. 713) and concludes that the mention of *Qarun* in these verses is clearly meant to signify the person of *Abu Lahab* (cf. *ibid*, p. 714). The story of *Qarun*, therefore, has the purpose of stirring the hearts of those lost in the vanity of the world (*is mithal se maqsud isi tara ke logon ki angken kolna hai*, *ibid*, p. 704).

One way in which Islahi brings out the connection between events occurring before and after the time of revelation is by highlighting the *purpose* for which these events were revealed. As we saw in the previous Surah, Islahi frequently emphasizes the purpose for which a particular personality or event was revealed in the Qur'an (*maqsud is sarguzasht ke sunane se*, *ibid*, p. 655). For example, Islahi says that verse 4 and the following two verses present the purpose for which the subsequent narrative about Moses and Pharaoh was revealed (*asal sarguzasht se pahle ye aur is ke ba'd ki do ayaten is ghayat o maqsud ko samne kar dene ke liye warid hui*, *ibid*, p.

656). The narrative is not presented simply as a narrative but has a specific objective (*ta ke log is qissah ko qissah ki haisiyat se na sunen balke is haq ko mad-i-nazar rak kar sunen jo is ke andar muzmar hai*, ibid, p. 657). The whole point of the narrative is lost if the reader does not grasp the purpose for which it is related. The present narrative about the Prophet Moses is directed to the leaders of the Quraysh for a specific purpose (*quraysh ke akabar o zo'uma ke samne rakne ke liye wo sarguzasht sunai ja rahi hai*, ibid). Islahi implies that the Quraysh understood the purpose of the narrative revealed to them through the Prophet, namely, that just as God sent the Prophet Moses to Pharaoh and to his people, similarly God has sent the last Prophet to the Quraysh (*quraysh ki taraf rasul bana kar bheja*, ibid, p. 681). Islahi does not try to connect the purpose that the narrative had at the time of revelation with the purpose the narrative could have for people living in the modern world.¹⁷⁹

According to Islahi, verse 40 clearly brings out the purpose of the whole narrative:

And so We seized him and his hosts and cast them into the sea: and behold what happened in the end to those evildoers.

The verse explains the purpose for which the narrative has been revealed (*is haqiqat ki taraf tawajjoh dalai gai hai jis ko wazeh karne hi ke liye ye sarguzasht sunai gai hai*, ibid, p. 677). Islahi identifies the purpose of the narrative in terms of providing the same kind of consolation (*tasalli*, ibid)¹⁸⁰ for the last Prophet that was given to the earlier Prophets and the same kind of warning for the proud people who responded to the last Prophet's message in the way that Pharaoh and his people responded to the Prophet Moses (*in fir'aunion ke lie tanbiya o tazkir bhi jo an hazrat aur ap ki da'awat ke ma'amle mein bilkul isi rosh par chal rahe the*, ibid, pp. 677-678). The narrative of Moses and Pharaoh is thus a kind of pre-view of what will happen later during the life and times of the last Prophet. Islahi understands the Surah as an example of the way in which God strengthens the last Prophet to fulfill the mission entrusted to him.

¹⁷⁹ However, Islahi does draw out practical conclusions from the encounter of Moses with the two women in verses 23-28. Islahi draws out these practical conclusions or lessons without referring to the overall purpose or objective of the narrative. Islahi misinterprets the meaning of verses 23-28 because he does not see the encounter of Moses and the two women in the light of the overall purpose (*is misal se maqsud*, ibid, p. 704) and the inter-connectedness of the narrative (*is roshni mein age ki ayat ki tilawat firmaiye*, ibid).

¹⁸⁰ Islahi says that the final verses of the Surah, verses 85-88, deal almost entirely with this theme of consolation (*tasalli*, ibid, p. 716). God consoles the Prophet by reminding him that he has performed his task and that he should leave the rest to God (*tum ne apna farz ada kar dia. ab ma'mla allah ke hawala karo*, ibid). Islahi says that verse 86 develops the same point (*ye upar wale mazmun hi ki mazid wazahat hai*, ibid) and verse 87 provides further support for the same topic (cf. ibid, p. 718).

The Social Context

To understand the Surah, Islahi refers to various aspects of its social, historical and cultural background. According to Islahi, the history of the way the Israelites were oppressed will help to explain verse 5:

But it was Our will to bestow Our favour upon those (very people) who were deemed (so) utterly low in the land, and to make them forerunners in faith, and to make them heirs (to Pharaoh's glory).

Islahi says that history makes it clear (*tarikh ke mutala'ah se ma'lum hota hai*, *ibid*, p. 658) that Pharaoh and his people gave a political twist to the presence of the Israelites in their land (*ek bilkul siyasi rang de dia tha*, *ibid*). Moreover, Islahi explains verse 54 with recourse to information that can be found in "the books of history" (*tafsil tarikh ki kitabon mein bhi maujud hai*, *ibid*, p. 690). Furthermore, Islahi says that the tendency for *Qarun* to display his wealth with great pomp and show was well known (*ma'lum hota hai us ne isi dauran mein*, *ibid*, p. 710). Without analyzing his historical sources, Islahi simply states that this is an evident fact of history.¹⁸¹

Furthermore, Islahi reads verse 11 as providing physical or material information rather than seeing the details provided by this verse as part of an unfolding story. For instance, verse 11 mentions that the girl "watched him from afar, while they (who had taken him in) were not aware of it". Islahi concludes from this phrase that the royal court of Pharaoh was not far from the dwellings of the Israelites (*is se ma'lum hota hai ke shahi mahal israilion ki basti se ziyadah fasle bar nahi tha*, *ibid*, p. 661). Similar practical reasons are given to explain why Moses entered the city, according to verse 15:

And (one day) he entered the city at a time when (most of) its people were (resting in their houses,) unaware of what was going on (in the streets).

Islahi says that Moses entered the city during the resting time in order to avoid the attention of onlookers (*is wajh se inhen ye kam logon ki nagahon se bach bacha ke aise auqat mein karna parta jin mein log aram karte hain*, *ibid*, p. 663). But what benefit does the reader obtain from an explanation of these details? Islahi is preoccupied with explaining details of the narrative independently of the narrative as a whole.

¹⁸¹ Muhammad Asad says that "the conventional 'identification' of *Qarun* with the *Korah* of the Old Testament (Numbers xvi) is neither relevant nor warranted by the Qur'anic text, the more so as the purport of this legend is a moral lesson and not a historical narrative." Asad (1983), p. 602, note 84.

Another illustration of the historical situation (*is daur mein*, *ibid*, p. 686) is the Jews' opposition to the Prophet, which Islahi explains by comparing several verses (*qarina dalil hai*, *ibid*). As verse 48 says:

And yet, now that the truth has come unto them from Us, they say, 'Why has he not been vouchsafed the like of what Moses was vouchsafed?'

But did they not also, before this, deny the truth of what Moses was vouchsafed? (For) they do say, 'Two examples of delusion, (seemingly) supporting each other!' And they add, 'Behold, we refuse to accept either of them as true!'

According to Islahi, the passage indicates that the Quraysh took up this objection from the Jews and started to spread it around (*qarina dalil hai ke is 'itraz ko phelaya to quraysh ne lekin is ke sikhane wale yahud the*, *ibid*). Islahi claims that subsequent verses show that the Jews provoked the Quraysh to oppose the Prophet (*yahud ne quraysh ko an hazrat salla allahu 'alayhi wa sallam ke khilaf uksane ke lie darpardah reshadawanian sharu kar di thi*, *ibid*, pp. 686-687) and the Quraysh were provoked by naively taking up the objection presented to them by the Jews (*quraysh apni sada lauhi ke sabab se yahud ki chal na samajh sake aur besamjhe bojhe ye 'itraz bhi unhone naql karna sharu kar dia*, *ibid*, p. 687). In short, the Qur'an addresses this specific situation (*quran ne yahan isi ka jawab dia hai*, *ibid*). Islahi has built up an argument that best illustrates the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah about the status of the Prophet and the Qur'an.

Transcending the Specific Context

Verses 14-22 describe the violent encounter between Moses and the Israelite who twice asked Moses for help against his enemy. Islahi explains that this kind of reformer was needed by society at that time (*is zamane se apni qaum ke andar ek musleh*, *ibid*, p. 666), implying that the modern world may need a different kind of reformer. In the next part of the narrative describing the encounter Moses had with the women at the wells of *Madyan* (verses 23-28), Islahi draws a conclusion about appropriate relations between men and women in modern society. Verse 23 had related the way two women were keeping back their flock from drinking at the well because a large group of men were watering their flocks. Verse 24 describes Moses' reaction to this situation:

So he watered (their flock) for them; and then he withdrew into the shade and prayed: 'O my Sustainer! Verily, in dire need am I of any good which Thou mayest bestow upon me!'

For Islahi, these events indicate that men and women of that period in history had separate fields of activity and did not work together shoulder to shoulder (*is se ma'lum hua ke is daur mein bhi 'auraton aur mardon ke dairah kar alag alag samjhe jate the*, ibid, p. 668). Islahi compares the customs of that time (*hazrat sh'aib ke zamane ke is mu'sharati tasawwur ko samne rakiye*, ibid) and the demands of modern society (*apni qaum ke in samajhi muslehin ke da'we par ghaur kijiye*, ibid). He implies that modern day relations between men and women should be based on the model of what happened between Moses and two women at the wells of *Madyan*.

Islahi analyzes a phrase from verse 25 and concludes that the encounter between the Prophet Moses and the two women provides guidance for modern society. Verse 25 says:

(Shortly) afterwards, one of the two (maidens) approached him, walking shyly.

Islahi finds this phrase very significant and adds his own details to describe how these two women behaved towards Moses (*kapron ko sanbhale aur apni ihtiyat ki jaghon ko mahfuz kiye hue ain*, ibid, p. 670). Islahi concludes that the Qur'an intends to indicate the correct behaviour expected of men and women today (*quran har qadam par ye namayan karna chahta hai ke sharifana zindagi ke 'adat o atwar kia hai*, ibid). Other Surahs also provide general instructions in this regard (*is zabtah ki wazahat ham kar chuke hain*, ibid) because this kind of social interaction is considered appropriate not only for women at the time of revelation but also for women in general (*jab in ke lie 'ind allah pasandidah rosh ye hai to in khawatin ke lie pasandidah rosh kia hogi jin ko is tara ki koi majburi nahi hai*, ibid). Islahi has derived a general rule from a consideration of the customs of the period based on an analysis of some of the words used in the narrative.

In his discussion of the rejection of the Prophet by the Quraysh, Islahi also moves beyond the specific context to draw universal conclusions. As verse 57 says:

Now some say, 'If we were to follow the guidance to which thou invitest us, we would be torn away from our very soil!'

Why – have We not established for them a sanctuary secure, to which, as a provision from Us, shall be gathered the fruits of all (good) things?

But most of them are unaware (of this truth).

The Quraysh made these objections because they were afraid of losing their socio-religious and political prestige (*unhone pure mulk par apni mazhabi o*

siyasi dhak qaim rakne ke lie ye tadbir ikhtiyar ki thi, ibid, p. 691). Islahi explains the kind of social and political motives that prompted the Quraysh to reject the message of the Prophet (cf. ibid) and says that similar arguments are used today against the establishment of an Islamic economic and political order in the modern world (*ye ba'ina wohi 'itraz hai jo aj hamare lidar hazrat islami nazam, islami mu'asharat, islami hadud o ta'zirat aur islami nizam-i-ma'ishat ke khilaf utate hain*, ibid, p. 692). Islahi finds a direct link between the context of the period of the Quraysh with the modern era. His approach resembles the direct link he made earlier (based on verses 23-24) between the social mores prevalent at the time of Moses and the social relations of men and women in the modern world.

According to Islahi, verse 43 indicates God's intention to bestow leadership on those nations to which he gave the Book and the *shariy'ah* (*dunya ki imamat o peshwai diye jane ke ham ma'ni hai*, ibid) but Islahi does not explain how he derives such a general principle or historical law from this verse. Similarly, Islahi derives several general conclusions from the story of Moses' birth in verses 7-13. With regard to verse 10, for example, Islahi concludes that "few people" understand (*bahot kam log samajhte hain*, ibid, p. 661) and the conclusion to his discussion of verse 13 is that "the majority of people" do not understand (*aksar log . . . nahi samajhte*, ibid, p. 662). Islahi frequently makes the verses of the Surah apply to mankind in general. For example, verse 50 is directed to people in general (*insan*, ibid, p. 688) and the same can be said for verse 80 (*insan*, ibid, p. 711).

The Way of God

Another way in which Islahi draws general conclusions from particular events in the Qur'an is by referring to "the way of God" (*sunnat-i-ilahi*). He usually refers to this concept in order to explain verses concerning the trials of life and the reward and punishment in the life to come. For example, verse 10 refers to the mother of Moses:

On the morrow, however, an aching void grew up in the heart of the mother of Moses, and she would indeed have disclosed all about him had We not endowed her heart with enough strength to keep alive her faith (in Our promise).

It is in keeping with "the way of God" that the mother of Moses experienced the kind of "trial" (*imtehan*) that all God's servants will experience (*allah ta'ala apne bandon aur bandion ko imtehan mein to dalta hai ke ye imtehan is ki sunnat hai*, ibid, p. 661). Islahi moves from the particular event

concerning Moses' mother to include all people (*is ki ye sunnat bhi hai ke jo log is ke imtehan ki rah mein bazi khel jate hain wo in ko sinbhalta bhi hai*, *ibid*). Islahi makes it quite clear that this verse is not limited to the mother of Moses but concerns all God's faithful servants (*apne ba iman bandon aur bandion ke sath allah ta'ala ka ma'mla yun hi hai*, *ibid*).

Another example of the way Islahi relates the concept "the way of God" (*sunnat-i-ilahi*, *ibid*, p. 667) with a universal teaching from the Qur'an is to be found in his comment on the phrase from verse 22: "he turned his face towards *Madyan*". Islahi says that this phrase could not be referring to the migration that the Prophets undertake (*hijrat nahi tha*, *ibid*) because Moses departed from *Madyan* without clear instructions from God but simply relied on God's guidance. Islahi turns this event into an example for all believers to encourage them to trust in God's guidance, especially in times of difficulty (*ye wage' allah ke in tamam bandon aur bandion ke lie nahayat sabaq amuz hai*, *ibid*).

Moreover, Islahi refers to "the way of God" (*sunnat-i-ilahi*) to explain the universal law of history that he finds in verse 46:

And neither wert thou present on the slope of Mount Sinai when We called out (to Moses): but (thou, too, art sent) as an act of thy Sustainer's grace, to warn people to whom no warner has come before thee, so that they might bethink themselves (of Us).

The verse does not just refer to an event that occurred on Mount Sinai but illustrates the way God deals with all people throughout history (*sunnat-i-ilahi ye hai ke agar koi qaum khuda ke bheje hue manzar ke anzar se yad dahani nahi hasil karti to wo tabah kar di jati hai*, *ibid*, p. 681). Islahi uses the same concept (*sunnat-i-ilahi ke bamujib wo hidayat se mahrum hi rahti hain*, *ibid*, p. 688) to explain the following phrase from verse 50:

Verily, God does not grace with His guidance people who are given to evildoing!

Moreover, he explains verse 59 by using the same concept (*sunnat-i-ilahi*, *ibid*, p. 694).¹⁸² Islahi frequently finds confirmation of this general law of history by linking together both "the way of God" (*sunnat-i-ilahi*) and the complete evidence provided by the Prophets (*itimam-i-hujjat*, *ibid*, p. 686).¹⁸³

¹⁸² Islahi gives a similar explanation of the parallel verses that are to be found in Surah *Ash Shu'ara*, verses 208-209.

¹⁸³ Islahi says that God sent the last Prophet for the same reason, namely, to provide complete evidence for the truth of God's message (cf. *ibid*, p. 682). The concept (*itimam-i-hujjat*) is constantly used by Islahi to

Different Kinds of Language

Sometimes Islahi derives the meaning of a verse from its style. For example, in verse 37, the Prophet Moses uses the style of omission (*uslub-i-kalam dalil hai ke yahan muqabil ka jumla hazf hai*, *ibid*, p. 676) to proclaim most eloquently that he will be victorious (*nahayat baligh aur shaistah uslub mein*, *ibid*). Moreover, the reference to the “lofty tower” of verse 38 is simply an expression of mockery (*is ki nau’iyat mahaz mazaq o istehza hi ki ma’alum hoti hai*, *ibid*, p. 676). Islahi insists that some foolish people took it literally (*kitne aihmaq to is ke mazaq ko haqiqat samajh baitate hain*, *ibid*, p. 677). Likewise, Islahi has no hesitation in understanding the phrase from verses 71-72: “Say: ‘Have you ever considered (this)’”, in a figurative sense rather than as a reference to “actual seeing” (*ye uslub taswir-i-hal ke liye hai*, *ibid*, p. 702). Again, the phrase from verse 57: “But most of them are unaware (of this truth)” is an expression of regret and not an expression of quantity or numbers (*ye in ke hal par azhar-i-afsos hai*, *ibid*, p. 692).

Islahi refers to the style of expression to explain the phrase from verse 48:

(For) they do say, ‘Two examples of delusion, (seemingly) supporting each other!’

Instead of understanding the “two examples” as referring to predictions about the last Prophet that exist in the Old Testament and in the Qur’an, Islahi considers these words to be an expression of hyperbole (*is ke andar mubalaghah ka mazmun paida ho gaya hai*, *ibid*, p. 687). In contrast, there is no exaggeration in the way the wealth of *Qarun* is portrayed in verse 76:

(Now) behold, *Qarun* was one of the people of Moses; but he arrogantly exalted himself above them – simply because We had granted him such riches that his treasure-chests alone would surely have been too heavy a burden for a troop of ten men or even more.

Islahi explains that historical conditions required such elaborate measures in order to safeguard one’s possessions (*is zamane mein khazanon ki hafazat ke lie. . . saf nahi hote the jis tara ke hamare zamane mein hote hain*, *ibid*, 708). Hence, according to Islahi, the description of treasure-chests in this verse is not a hyperbolic expression but the actual truth (*ye koi mubalaghah ka uslub bayan nahi hai balke bayan waqe’ hai*, *ibid*).

indicate the complete evidence provided by the Prophets according to the law of history that Islahi discovers in the Qur’an. Cf. *ibid*, pp. 674, 675, 686, 702, 703, and 704.

However, Islahi prefers a more physical understanding of the passages about the Day of Resurrection. For example, verses 41-42 say:

(We destroyed them,) and We set them up as archetypes (of evil) that show the way to the fire (of hell); and (whereas) no succour will come to them on Resurrection Day. We have caused a curse to follow them in this world as well; and on Resurrection Day they will find themselves among those who are bereft of all good.

Islahi understands these verses as presenting a description of what will actually happen (*har ek par nafsi nafsi ki halat hogi*, ibid, p. 678). Likewise, Islahi says that verses 62-75 are meant to be an expression of warning (*ye aur age ki tamam ayat musalsal tanbihat ki nau'iiyat ki hain*, ibid, p. 698) of what will actually take place (*qiyamat ke din allah ta'ala mushrikon par akhri itimam-i-hujjat ke liye ye bhi karega*, ibid, p. 703).

Islahi finds the whole history of God's revelation down through the ages expressed in verse 51:

Now, indeed, We have caused this word (of Ours) to reach mankind step by step, so that they might (learn to) keep it in mind.

Islahi says that this verse expresses the way God's revelation came to Moses and subsequently to the last Prophet and presents the message conveyed by verses 45-46 in a new way (*ek nae uslub se ye isi ka e'adah hai*, ibid, p. 688). Islahi does not elaborate on the new style (*nae uslub*) used here but is more intent on expressing the *content* of the message (cf. ibid, pp. 688-689). Other examples can be found where Islahi does refer to the use of "style" but is actually more intent on the content of the verse.¹⁸⁴ It seems that all the references to the style of expression that Islahi makes are guided by his understanding of the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah and by his efforts to illustrate this theme.

¹⁸⁴ While Islahi refers to the style used in the phrase from verse 22: "And as he turned his face towards Madyan" (*uslub-i-kalam*, ibid, p. 667), he is more intent on presenting the meaning of the phrase itself.

Conclusions

Islahi says that the original meaning of the Qur'an cannot be known without understanding the way personalities (such as *Qarun*) and events in the historical narratives compare and relate with one another (*jab tak quran mein bayan kardah waq'e'at ka ye pahlū samne na ho is waqt tak in ki asli hikmat wazeh nahi hoti*, *ibid*, p. 704). Islahi is suggesting that personalities and events mentioned in the historical narratives refer to actual personalities and events that the last Prophet (peace be upon him) and his followers had to confront. The meaning of this confrontation should be understood in the light (*is roshni mein*, *ibid*, p. 682) of the historical narratives. For example, Islahi compares *Qarun* in the historical narrative of this Surah with *Abu Lahab*, living at the time of revelation. Islahi's approach to the Qur'an refers only to events and personalities *before* and *during* the time of revelation and does not include the situation in the world *after* the time of revelation. There seems to be no valid reason for such a restriction.

Furthermore, Islahi refers to the event related in verses 23-24 (about the women at the well of *Madyan*), and says that these verses indicate how men and women in all times and circumstances should behave in public. It seems to me that these verses cannot be taken out of their narrative sequence in order to provide a comment on relations between men and women. Instead of isolating a few verses, one must examine the overall *purpose* of the narrative (*maqsud-i-kalam*, *ibid*, p. 679). Islahi is using these verses to confirm his own preconceived notions about the behaviour of men and women.

Islahi says that the deficiencies in the Torah will become obvious to anyone who compares the Torah with the Qur'an (*quran ke bayan ke muqabil mein taurat ka bayan berabt aur muharif bhi hai*, *ibid*, p. 680). Islahi's argument is that the last Prophet (peace be upon him) could not have obtained the more complete information that exists in the Qur'an simply by listening to the Torah. Islahi does not recognize the possibility that the narratives of the Qur'an and of the Torah may differ in their style and purpose (*maqsud-i-kalam*, *ibid*) and, therefore, may relate the same event from different or even contrasting points of view. There is no question, therefore, of deficiencies in the Torah.

Surah Al 'Ankabut

Introduction

The opening remarks of the Surah are directed at those who were persecuting the disciples of the last Prophet and enable Islahi to describe the social context. He says that young people and slaves were especially prone to harsh treatment by their elders at the time this Surah was revealed (*surah ke nuzul ke daur mein*, vol. 6, p. 11). This state of affairs naturally prompted many questions in the minds of these vulnerable people (*kamzaur irade ke logon ke andar*, *ibid*) concerning the veracity of the Qur'an and the Messenger of God. Such questions needed to be resolved when the right moment presented itself so that these vulnerable people would receive the necessary encouragement (*mazlumon aur kamzauron ki himmat afzai*, *ibid*). It was also necessary to confront certain people who were taking advantage of the situation by intensifying their oppressive activity (*khuda ki dhil apni fath samajh kar*, *ibid*).

The difficult social conditions prevalent at the time this Surah was revealed led the oppressed believers (*mazlum musalmanon ko*, *ibid*) to think of migration as a possible solution for their problems (*hijrat ki taraf bhi isharat hai*, *ibid*). They were told not to lose heart and to be prepared to leave their homelands for the sake of the truth (*haq ki khatir*, *ibid*). God would provide ample space and sustenance (*na khuda ki zamin tang hai aur na is ke khazanah rizq mein kamy hai*, *ibid*). God will take good care of those who leave their homelands for the sake of God (*jo log khuda ki rah mein hijrat karenge*, *ibid*).

The title of Islahi's introduction to the present Surah (*surah ka 'umud aur sabiq surah se ta'alluq*, *ibid*) indicates that Islahi wants to present the main theme ('*umud*) of this Surah as well as its relation with the previous Surah. The present Surah provides a detailed account of the opposition that was only hinted at in the previous Surah. The present Surah also provides the Muslims with instructions as to how they should engage the people of the Book in dialogue (*ahl kitab ke sath bahas mein in ko kiya raush ikhtiyar karni chahiye*, *ibid*).

The Social Context

Islahi begins to describe the social context from a consideration of the first verse:

Do men think that on their (mere) saying, “We have attained to faith”, they will be left to themselves, and will not be put to the test?

Islahi says that this verse was addressed to those people who were under the false impression that it was enough to have embraced Islam but were not prepared for the hardships that awaited them (*ba'z log islam mein dakhil to ho gaye they lekin in ko is rah ki sau'ubaton ka andaza nahin tha*, ibid, pp. 15-16). After warning those who claimed they were believers, verse 4 goes on to warn those people who were oppressing the Muslims:

Or do they think – they who do evil deeds (while claiming to have attained to faith) – that they can escape Us? Bad, indeed, is their judgment?

Islahi says that this verse appears to have no specific people in mind. However, it is actually addressed to those who were persecuting the Muslims at that time (“*y’alamun assiyati*” *agarche lafzan ‘am hai lekin isharah inhi nahanjar logon ki taraf hai jo baibas musalmanon par zulm dha rahe they*, ibid, p. 17). In order to describe this context of persecution even further, Islahi says that verse 5 is meant to bring consolation to these same Muslims who were being oppressed (*ye mazlum musalmanon ko tasalli di hai*, ibid).¹⁸⁵

According to Islahi, verse 8 also has a specific social context:

Now (among the best of righteous deeds which) We have enjoined upon man (is) goodness towards his parents; yet (even so,) should they endeavour to make thee ascribe divinity, side by side with Me, to something which thy mind cannot accept (as divine), obey them not.

Islahi says that those in authority were treating young people and slaves harshly at the time this Surah was revealed (*naujawan aur ghulam, surah ke nuzul ke daur mein, apne bapon aur aqaon ke hathon bari sakht azmaish ke daur se guzar rahe they*, ibid, p. 11). Islahi does not just mention that this happened now and again but that it was typical of the period (*azmaish ke daur se*, ibid). Islahi alludes to the treatment meted out to earlier prophets by their parents (cf. ibid, p. 18) and explains that the last Prophet and his followers also had to undergo such sufferings (*wo bhi islam lane ke jurm*

¹⁸⁵ Islahi makes use of the concept of “consolation” elsewhere in the Surah to indicate a similar context of oppression and rejection. For example, verse 45 is revealed to console the Prophet and his followers (*ye nabi salla allahu alayhi wa sallam aur musalmanon ko tasalli di gayi hai*, ibid, p. 51).

mein . . . zulm o sitam ke hadif ban gaye, ibid). He says the verse instructs the followers of the Prophet how to behave in such situations (*is surat-i-hal ka taqaza ye hua*, ibid). In other words, the social context of the period explains the meaning of the verse.

Some verses are addressed directly to the Quraysh, for example, verse 22 (*quraysh ko bara-i-rast khitaab kar ke*, ibid, p. 32). Other verses are warnings directed to the Quraysh, for example, verses 36-37 (*quraysh ko mutanbih kiya hai*, ibid, p. 39). Islahi links the latter verses with the Quraysh because the people to whom they were originally addressed were merchants, just like the Quraysh (*is liye ke ye bhi tijarat peshah they*, ibid, p. 40). The next verse is directed to the Quraysh for the same reason (*ye quraysh ko tawajjeh dalai gayi hai*, ibid) and verse 39 refers to other people (*Qarun*, Pharaoh and *Haman*). However, this verse is also directed to the Quraysh since it holds up a mirror in which they could take note of their own behaviour (*quraysh ke samne ye ek aina rakha gaya hai*, ibid, p. 41). Islahi does not refer to the Quraysh again until he explains verse 53 in terms of the objections and the harassment the Quraysh inflicted on the Prophet in response to the message of the Qur'an (*in ke pindar ko bari chaut lagti aur jhunjhala kar ap ko zach karne ke liye ye matalba karte*, ibid, p. 60). Finally, Islahi sees verse 67 as referring to the Quraysh:

Are they, then, not aware that We have set up a sanctuary secure (for those who believe in Us), the while all around them men are being carried away (by fear and despair)? Will they, then, (continue to) believe in things false and vain, and thus God's blessings deny?

By understanding the word "sanctuary" in a physical way, Islahi says this verse describes the situation of the Quraysh who abused the secure sanctuary that God had prepared for them (*ye mamun haram quraysh ke liye ek safinah najat ke manind tha*, ibid, p. 65).

Islahi says that other verses are directed to the believers – as in the last clause of verse 45:

And God knows all that you do.

According to Islahi, the plural form of address indicates that the verse is addressed to the whole community (*khitaab . . . is tukre mein jam'a ka sighah a gaya hai. ye is bat ka qarina hai ke upar ka khitaab anhazrat salla allahu alayhi wa sallam se bihaisiyat ummat ke wakil ke hai*, ibid, p. 54). Islahi finds further evidence in verse 56 to describe the community of believers:

O you servants of Mine who have attained to faith! Behold, wide is Mine earth: worship Me, then, Me alone!

Islahi says that this verse is addressed to the Muslims who were oppressed (*ye in mazlum musalmanon ko khitab farmaya*, ibid, p. 61). Moreover, the reference to the earth being wide is an invitation for them to migrate to another place (*agar ye sarzamin tumhen chaurani pari to itminan rakho ke meri zamin bahut kashadah hai*, ibid). Clearly, Islahi is interpreting the verse in terms of the migration (*hijrat*, ibid, p. 62) that actually took place some years after this Surah was revealed. Earlier, Islahi had already interpreted verse 27 in terms of migration as a solution for the oppressed Muslims (*mazlum musalmanon ke liye hijrat ke siwa koi aur rah baqi nahin rah gayi thi*, ibid, p. 35). The Prophet is encouraged to trust in God as the prophet Abraham did in similar circumstances. In this context, verse 27 and verses 56-58 can all be seen as sources of consolation for the last Prophet (*tasalli ke mafhum ki tayid mein hain*, ibid, p. 61). Islahi makes frequent use of the term “consolation” to link different verses together and to interpret their purpose.¹⁸⁶

Islahi explains the social context of several verses in great detail. For example, Islahi says that, in verse 50, the People of the Book are answered indirectly through the Prophet because the Surah does not intend to address them in a direct way (*mukhatab karna bhi pasand nahin farmaya hai*, ibid, p. 58). Islahi proceeds to explain the context by saying that the People of the Book uttered these objections in order to provoke the leaders of the Quraysh (*ye e'tiraz wo quraysh ko uksaney ke liye uthatey they*, ibid). Islahi says the answers provided by verses 50-51 are actually directed to the Quraysh because it was they who had most to gain from these objections (*quraysh ko ek bahut bari tayid hasil ho jati is wajh se wo is ko khub phalatey*, ibid, p. 58).

Finally, Islahi's discussion of verse 46 provides an example of the way Islahi draws various conclusions based on the context:

And do not argue with the followers of earlier revelation otherwise than in a most kindly manner – unless it be such of them as are bent on evildoing – and say: “We believe in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, as well as that which has been bestowed upon you; for our God and your God is one and the same, and it is unto Him that we (all) surrender ourselves.”

¹⁸⁶ See above, footnote 1. See also footnote 5, where I mention “consolation” as one of the general concepts or categories that Islahi uses.

Islahi's discussion of the context begins with an explanation that the People of the Book differ from the unbelieving pagans (*mushrikin 'arab se bilkul mukhtalif thiy*, ibid, p. 54). He describes the context even further by accusing the persons addressed in this verse as having adopted beliefs contrary to monotheism (*tum ne apne andar aisi baten bhi jam'a kar rakhi hain jo is 'aqide se sarihan mutanaqiz hain*, ibid, p. 56). Finally, Islahi invites the People of the Book to reject contrary views and to embrace Islam (*is tarah tum bhi apna ye tanaqiz dur kar ke muslim ban jao*, ibid, p. 56).

Transcending the Specific Context

After making these historical and geographical references, Islahi gives a more universal interpretation by using general terms like "man" (*insan ka hal ye hai*, ibid, p. 65). Likewise, after referring to the specific customs of the Arab unbelievers (*mushrikin 'arab*, ibid, p. 64), Islahi uses a general word for mankind (*insan*, ibid) and draws a general conclusion about all persons who are overly attached to this world (*ye dunya ke matwale log*, ibid).

At times, Islahi also goes beyond the specific context by presenting several conclusions in the introduction he provides for each section of verses. For example, in his introduction for verses 12-40, Islahi provides the following three conclusions:

1. Whoever decides to follow the way of God will have to endure many hardships (*bahut se imtehanat se guzarna parta hai*, ibid, p. 21).
2. Every person is responsible for his or her own religious and ethical behaviour (*har shakhs khud mas'ul o zimmadar hai*, ibid, p. 22).
3. Those who seek to lead God's faithful astray will have a limited opportunity to do this (*ek had tak allah ta'ala ki taraf se dhil to milti hai*, ibid) after which they will surely be brought to judgment.

Islahi concludes that these three "truths" are conveyed by the verses that belong to this section of the Surah (*age ki ayat mein inhi haqaiq ko . . . mubarhin kiya hai*, ibid). By expressing the content of this section of verses in such a succinct and definitive way, Islahi has moved away from the specific context in which these points arose. Moreover, the language he uses (*jo log, har shakhs*) gives these verses a universal quality.

Islahi provides another illustration of his tendency to draw general conclusions or to make points that go beyond the context in his discussion of verse 24, which concludes with the phrase:

Behold, in this (story) there are messages indeed for people who will believe.

Islahi articulates the “messages” (*nishaniyan*, *ibid*, p. 33) referred to in this verse as follows:

1. The first message is to remember the severe trials (*sakht imtehanat*, *ibid*) that will come one’s way.
2. The second message is that one must be ready to break with one’s family relations for the sake of the faith (*apne din ki hafazat ke liye ‘alaiq-i-muhabat ki tamam zanjiren taur kar sina sipar ho gaye*, *ibid*).
3. There is a limit to the trials that the faithful will endure (*in ko zaur azmai ki muhlat milti hai*, *ibid*) in accordance with God’s law (*allah ta’ala ke qanun-i-azmaish ka ye ek lazmi taqaza hai*, *ibid*).

Islahi summarizes verse 44 in a similar way:

God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with (an inner) truth: for, behold, in this (very creation) there is a message indeed for all who believe (in Him).

Islahi describes the “message” according to three points (cf. *ibid*, pp. 50-51). He says that he has already described the various aspects of this “message” in other places (*is nishani ke mukhtalif pahlu mukhtalif maqamat mein wazeh kiye ja chuke hain*, *ibid*, p. 50).

By presenting the “messages” mentioned in the verse according to several points or conclusions, Islahi disregards the specific context in which they were revealed.

Furthermore, Islahi approaches verse 56 in the same way:

O you servants of Mine who have attained to faith! Behold, wide is Mine earth: worship Me, then, Me alone!

After specifying the context by mentioning that the verse is addressed to the Muslims who were being oppressed at that time (*ye in mazlum musalmanon ko khitab farmaya*, *ibid*, p. 61), Islahi focuses on the words: “wide is Mine earth” to make three points (*chand baten*, *ibid*) meant for those who are forced to leave their homes for the sake of their faith (*agar meri khatir tum apne gharon ko choroge*, *ibid*):

1. Migration (*hijrat*, *ibid*) is necessary only when one’s faith is endangered.
2. In times of trial (*fitnah*, *ibid*), one must not abandon one’s faith in God.
3. If one must abandon one’s home for the sake of one’s faith, God will provide sufficient sustenance (*allah ta’ala rizaq o kafil hai*, *ibid*).

Here again, Islahi has focused on a subject that has a specific context in the Surah and has made general observations that disregard the context in which the verse was revealed.

The tendency to summarize a verse or a group of verses under a few points or headings is a characteristic of Islahi's method. For instance, he provides two explanations for the fact that Lot was upset over the coming of the messengers, according to verse 33:

And when Our messengers came unto Lot, he was sorely grieved on their account, seeing that it was beyond his power to shield them; but they said: "Fear not, and grieve not! Behold, we shall save thee and thy household – all but thy wife: she will indeed be among those that stay behind.

The first explanation is that the messengers looked like handsome young men and so Lot was afraid that his countrymen would sexually assault these guests of his (*is wajh se paraishan hue ke ye farishte khubru naujavan ki shakl mein aye they*, ibid, p. 38). The second explanation Islahi gives for the fact that Lot was upset is that he feared for his family (*in ke muta'lliqin ke liye kiya hukm hota hai*, ibid). By making succinct explanations, Islahi opens the way for more general conclusions that apply universally.

Sometimes Islahi provides only one explanation that forms a general conclusion for his discussion of a verse. For example, verse 38 says:

And (the tribes of) 'Ad and Thamud, (too, did We destroy -) as should have become obvious to you from (whatever there remains of) their dwellings. (They perished) because Satan had made their (sinful) doings seem goodly to them, and thus had barred them from the path (of God) despite their having been endowed with the ability to perceive the truth.

Islahi draws a general conclusion that a nation's success in science and advanced civilization does not indicate that its people are on the right path (*mujarrd sains aur tamaddun o t'amir mein kisi qaum ka 'uruq is bat ki shahadat nahin hai ke wo zindagi ki sahih shahrah par gamzan hai*, ibid, p. 40). This is the way that most people think but it is faulty (*jaisa ke 'am taur par baibasirat log samajhte hain*, ibid). Islahi has made a general statement that he sees as universal in application.

A final example of this tendency to classify and to generalize is to be found in Islahi's discussion of verse 45:

Convey (unto others) whatever of this divine writ has been revealed unto thee, and be constant in prayer: for, behold, prayer restrains (man) from loathsome deeds and from all that runs counter to reason; and remembrance of God is indeed the greatest (good). And God knows all that you do.

Islahi highlights the two benefits of prayer mentioned in the clause: “prayer restrains (man) from loathsome deeds and from all that runs counter to reason” by moving directly from the context at the time of ‘*Ad* and ‘*Thamud* to the context of the present day (*ab hamara mu’sharah*, *ibid*, p. 52). In other words, Islahi does not consider it necessary to recognize the different context that prevailed at the time of revelation but makes a direct comparison between the society of ‘*Ad* and ‘*Thamud* with the moral corruption of modern society (*is zamane mein mu’asharat o ma’ishat ka ye fasad zindagi ke har shu’bah par jis tarah cha chuka hai is ke muta’lliq ye kahna shayd beja na ho ke mazi ki tarikh mein is ki koi misal maujud nahin hai*, *ibid*). This comparison by Islahi is a personal judgment and is a general statement that his applies to mankind in a general way.¹⁸⁷

The Way of God

Islahi refers to “the way of God” (*sunnat-i-ilahi*) in order to make the transition from the specific context of a verse to a universal application. Verse 3 says:

Yea, indeed, We did test those who lived before them; and so, (too, shall be tested the people now living; and) most certainly will God mark out those who prove themselves true, and most certainly will He mark out those who are lying.

After alluding to the historical context of the verse indicated by the reference to “those who lived before them”, Islahi says that it is God’s way to distinguish the just from the wicked (*allah lazman rast bazon aur jute mudd’iyon mein imtiyaz karega*, *ibid*, p. 16). This is the established way in which God deals with mankind in general (*muqarrarah sunnat*, *ibid*)¹⁸⁸. Even though human beings bring punishment upon themselves by their own actions (*admi apne ap ko abdi ‘azab ka sazawar bana le*, *ibid*, p. 20), this verse also expresses God’s way of dealing with mankind (*is dunya mein allah ta’ala ki jo sunnat jari hai*, *ibid*). Such punishment is the result of a person’s own behaviour (*wo khud apni janon par zulm dahane wale bante*

¹⁸⁷ Islahi makes a sweeping reference to mankind (*insan*) six times in discussing this particular verse. Cf. *ibid*, p. 53.

¹⁸⁸ Exactly the same words (*muqarrarah sunnat*) are used in relation to verse 53 (cf. *ibid*, p. 60).

hain, ibid, p. 29) since God has provided sufficient evidence to support the truth (*is liye ke in ke upar allah ta'ala ki hujjat puri ho chuki hoti hai*, ibid). It is characteristic of “the way of God” to test the righteous through many trials and to punish the unrighteous only after they choose to reject the abundant evidence that God provides (*sunnat-i-ilahi ke mutabiq . . . 'azab se pahle in par itmam-i-hujjat lazmi hai*, ibid).

Furthermore, Islahi explains the readiness of Lot in verse 26 to “forsake the domain of evil (and turn) to my Sustainer” as an example of the “way of God” (*sunnat-i-ilahi ke mutabiq, hijrat ka 'azm farmaya*, ibid, p. 34). Islahi understands the concept of “forsaking the domain of evil” (*hijrat*) in a physical sense as actually leaving a place and its people (*ab main qaum ko chaur kar apne rab ki taraf hijrat kar raha hun*, ibid) because it illustrates the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah about the Prophet and the Qur'an. He says that the Quraysh saw evidence of the ruins of the Lot's town as they passed by, according to verse 35:

And (so it happened; and) thereof, indeed, We have left a clear sign for people who use their reason.

Islahi says that this verse expresses the Quraysh's need for evidence of God's message. Islahi moves beyond this specific context by interpreting the “clear sign” mentioned in the verse as an example of the universal “way of God” (*is sunnat-i-ilahi ke zahur ka ek nahayat wazeh nishan thi*, ibid, p. 39). He also broadens the scope of this verse by linking it with the modern day context in which people fail to use their reason (*is zamane mein . . . in ki 'aql bilkul kund hai*, ibid). However, Islahi simply assumes that the correct use of reason would naturally lead mankind to hear and to accept the message of God.¹⁸⁹

The “way of God” also refers to the period of grace that each nation enjoys before God makes a final decision about it (*allah ta'ala ke han ek muddat muqarar hai*, ibid, p. 60). The same notion is used to explain verse 14:

And, indeed, (in times long past) We sent forth Noah unto his people, and he dwelt among them a thousand years bar fifty; and then the floods overwhelmed them while they were still lost in evildoing.

¹⁸⁹ Islahi distinguishes between people who use their reason and those who do not use their reason (*wohi log karte hain jin ke andar 'aql o 'ilm ki roshni maujud hai . . . is tarah ke log har waqi'ah se sabaq hasil karte hain*, ibid, pp. 49-50). For Islahi, “use of reason” or rationality is the correct way to behave. It is to use one's natural gifts (*fitri salahiyaten*, ibid, p. 49). But rationality and human nature are not neutral terms. People justify their use of reason in different ways according to their intentions and circumstances.

Islahi says that God provides the time and the opportunity for each nation to act in truth (*allah ta'ala 'adae haq ko dhil to deta hai lekin is dhil ki ek had hoti hai*, ibid, p. 29). After this period of grace is over and all the evidence for truth has been presented, a nation must reform its ethical behaviour to avoid being destroyed (*allah ta'ala ne qaumon ki tabahi ki muddat in ke akhlaqi zawal ke pemane se nap kar muqarar ki hai*, ibid, p. 60).

Conclusions

Islahi divides the Surah into several sub-groups and introduces each sub-group by providing three conclusions *prior* to his discussion of the verses (*age ki ayat mein inhi haqaiq ko . . . mubarhan kiya hai*, ibid, p. 22). In other words, these conclusions are not the result of an investigation into the text but actually predispose the reader to understand the text in a particular way. Islahi articulates the “truths” (*haqaiq*) and the messages (*nishaniyan*, ibid, p. 33) contained in these verses and gives explanations for other verses. These arbitrary formulations by Islahi prevent the reader from discovering the more universal meaning of the Qur’an in the changing circumstances of the world. .

Islahi refers to the universal law of history that describes the rise and fall of all nations (*ek qaum ko wo wujud bakhshata hai aur phir is ko mita kar is ki jagah dusri qaum ko lata hai*, ibid, p. 31). By comparing this universal law of history with the way day follows night, spring follows autumn and life comes after death (cf. ibid), Islahi does not make allowance for the role of human freedom in the unfolding of history. He implies that the development of human society is subject to a mechanical process. It seems to me that Islahi has imposed his own philosophy of history onto the Qur’an.

Finally, Islahi applies this law of history to the decline of the Jews and to their replacement by the Muslims. Islahi makes use of his understanding of the law of history to illustrate and to confirm his formulation of the theme (*‘umud*) of the Surah.

Surah Ar Rum

Introduction

This Surah forms a pair with the previous Surah *Al Ankabut*.¹⁹⁰ For this reason, there is no basic difference between the main theme (*'umud*) of this Surah and the previous one. In the previous Surah, the Muslims were told that, despite outward appearances, they would win the upper hand with the help of God. This declaration was based on the fact that God created this world according to the truth (*bil haq paida kiya hai*, vol. 6, p. 69) and that all commands and prohibitions are in God's hands. Both in this world and in the next, God will grant victory to his messenger and to those who become his disciples (*wo is dunya mein bhi apne rasul aur apne sathiyon ko ghalba bakhshenga*, *ibid*), thereby demonstrating God's perfect truth and justice. On the Last Day, falsity will be totally annihilated and, on that day, both truth and those who follow the truth will obtain eternal sovereignty (*is waqt batil yaksar nabud ho jayega aur haq o ahl haq ko abdi badshahi hasil hogi*, *ibid*).

Islahi proceeds to outline the specific historical event that forms the background for this Surah. The defeat of the Byzantines was a boost for the Meccans and it provided them with a pretext to ridicule the message of the Qur'an and the claim by the Muslims that they would be victorious (*musalmanon ko ghalba hasil hoga*, *ibid*) or that there would be a Last Day on which the truth would win out (*jis mein haq ka bol bala hoga*, *ibid*). These claims seemed quite absurd to the Meccans. For if these things were all true, then how could the Persians defeat the Byzantines, who also adhered to these basic claims? The Meccans argued that the Persian victory over the Byzantines was an historical event which demonstrated the veracity of their own religion and which proved that their own point of view would gain the upper hand (*ye waqi'ah to is bat ki saf shahadat hai ke hamara hi din o 'aqidah aur hamara hi nazariyah zindagi sahih hai aur ham hi ghalba o hakim rahenge*, *ibid*). Islahi says that the present Surah takes this historical event as the basis for clarifying all these truths about which the unbelievers were fomenting doubt (*isi waqi'ah ko bunyad bana kar in tamam haqaiq ko azsar-i-nau mubarhan kiya hai*, *ibid*).

¹⁹⁰ According to most scholars, however, Surah *Ar Rum* was revealed *before* Surah *Al Ankabut*. Islahi does not discuss the impact that the order in which the Surahs were revealed has on the pairing and grouping of the Surahs.

The Theme of the Surah

Since the present Surah has the same Qur'anic name¹⁹¹ as the previous one (*alif, lam, mim*, ibid, p. 74), Islahi argues that there is no thematic difference between these two Surahs (*ye qarina hai is bat ka ke 'umud ke 'itibar se donon suraton mein koi khas faraq nahin hai*, ibid). The theme (*'umud*) already appears in the prophecy contained in verses 2-4 about the truthfulness of the Prophet (*ye peshingoi ap ki nubuwat ki ek dalil hogi*, ibid, p. 75). Islahi finds further support for the theme (*'umud*) of prophethood in the fact that the believers rejoiced to hear the prophecy about the Byzantines' victory. According to Islahi, the words from verse 4:

And on that day will the believers (too, have cause to) rejoice show that the believers recognized the prophethood of the last Prophet (*musalman khush honge . . . is wajh se bhi ke quran ki ek 'azim peshingoi jo nabi salla allahu alayhi wa sallam ki risalat ki ek bahut bari dalil hai, puri hogi*, ibid). However, the prophethood of the last Prophet is not the only reason why the believers could have rejoiced.¹⁹²

Islahi finds further evidence to support the theme (*'umud*) of this Surah from a particular understanding of "natural disposition" (*fitrat*) in verse 30:

And so, set thy face, steadfastly towards the (one ever-true) faith, turning away from all that is false, in accordance with the natural disposition which God has instilled into man.

Since a person's natural disposition enables him to understand the teachings of the prophets, no sane person will reject these teachings (*jo salim al tab' they unhone nabiyan ki har bat ko apne hi dil ki awaz samjha*, ibid, p. 94). Even a person whose unsound judgment causes him to reject the prophets will nevertheless acknowledge the truth of their teachings in their hearts (*apne dilon ke andar wo bhi rasulon ki sadaqat o haqaniyat ke mu'atarif rahe*, ibid). Since Islahi's aim is to find support for the theme (*'umud*) of prophethood, he limits the scope of the term "natural disposition" to an acceptance or rejection of the prophets' teachings, disregarding the possibility that the term "natural disposition" could have other meanings and implications.

¹⁹¹ Islahi seems to imply that the name *Ar Rum* is, therefore, not the real Qur'anic name. This view is consistent throughout *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* but it is not shared by the majority of scholars.

¹⁹² In contrast, Muhammad Asad says that the rejoicing mentioned in this phrase is a reference to the battle of *Badr*, which took place at the same time as "the victories of Heraclius over the Persians". Asad (1983), p. 618, footnote 3.

The Social Context

The opening verses of the Surah indicate that political power, at that time, was in the hands of the Byzantines (*is 'ilāqē par is zamāne mein rumiyon ki hukumat thiy*, *ibid*, p. 74). Moreover, verse 6 throws more light on the context:

(This is) God's promise. Never does God fail to fulfill His promise – but most people know (it) not.

Islahi says the verse refers to the promise made to the Prophet and to the Muslims that they would be victorious (*peghambar salla allahu alayhi wa sallam aur musulmanon ke ghalbah ka wo wa'dah bhi hai*, *ibid*, p. 76). The verse is also a message for the Quraysh who rejected the Prophet (*jis ki takzib ke liye quraysh ne majusiyaon ki fatah ko dalil banaya tha*, *ibid*). Islahi views the context in the light (*is roshni mein*) of the theme (*'umud*).

The unbelieving Arabs form the background for many of the verses in this Surah. These are the people described in the words of verse 7: “they are utterly unaware” (*mushrikin 'arab*, *ibid*, p. 77). Islahi says that verse 8 is directed to the Quraysh (*quraysh qaumon ki is tarikh par ghaur karen*, *ibid*, p. 78), whom he calls the unbelieving Arabs because they deny the resurrection (*munkarin-i-qayamat*, *ibid*, p. 79).¹⁹³ He indicates why these Arabs scoffed at the message of the resurrection (*in ki isi zahniyyat ko samne rakh kar*, *ibid*, p. 88) and explains the parable given in verse 28 in the light of the Arab peoples' way of thinking (*mushrikin khud to larkiyon ko napasand karte*, *ibid*, p. 90). In this way, Islahi gathers evidence to illustrate the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah about prophethood.

Islahi makes it clear that verse 30 is addressed to the Prophet as a representative of the community (*bahaisiyat ummat ke wakil ke khitab hai*, *ibid*, p. 93) and describes the context in terms of the opponents and their empty objections (*mukhalafon ke sare 'itarazat bilkul lay'ni hain*, *ibid*):

And so, set thy face steadfastly towards the (one ever-true) faith, turning away from all that is false.

Islahi refers to the Quraysh as an example of the description that verse 32 gives of “those who have broken the unity of their faith” (*is ke awwal masdaq quraysh hai*, *ibid*, p. 96) but explains that the Muslims are addressed in this verse because it is improper to address the unbelievers directly

¹⁹³ Islahi says that verse 19 also describes the unbelieving Arabs (cf. *ibid*, p. 84) and that verses 25-26 also deal with the same group of unbelieving Arabs (cf. *ibid*, p. 88).

(*musalmanon ko mukhatab kar ke farmaya gaya hai. goya mushrikin . . . laiq-i-khitab nahin rahe*, ibid). Moreover, verse 36 describes the attitude of the Quraysh:

And (thus it is:) when we let men taste (Our) grace, they rejoice in it; but if evil befalls them as an outcome of what their own hands have wrought – lo! they lose all hope!

Islahi says that the verse does describe a general situation but that it is also a specific warning for the Quraysh (*ye baten sab 'am alfaz mein irshad hui hain is liye ke 'am halat dar haqiqat yahi hai lekin in ayat ke nuzul ke waqt zahir hai ke in ka isharah quraysh ki taraf tha*, ibid, p. 97). Similarly, Islahi says that verse 40 is a direct warning for the Quraysh concerning their corrupt practices (*ab ye quraysh ko barah-i-rast dhamki di ja rahi hai*, ibid, p. 105) and verse 41 is also directed to the Quraysh (*yahan quraysh ko pahle qism ke 'azab se daraya hai*, ibid, p. 106).

Islahi keeps referring to the unbelieving Arabs and the Quraysh because of the Surah's theme ('*umud*) about the prophethood of the last Prophet and the rejection of the Qur'an by the unbelievers. The social context illustrates the background for this theme ('*umud*).

Transcending the Specific Context

Besides highlighting the specific context, Islahi also draws out several conclusions or principles that move beyond this context. His discussion of the opening verses of the Surah, which describe the defeat of the Byzantines and their eventual victory, lead to conclusions that are universally valid. He says that corruption in society is not caused by rituals and doctrines but by individual and collective behaviour that flows from these doctrines (*sirf rasum o 'aqaid ijtimai' zindagi ke banane bigarne mein asli dakhil nahin rakhte balke asl she wo infiradi o ijtimai' kardar hai jo in 'aqaid o rasum se paida hota hai*, ibid, p. 75). Islahi goes on to argue that the eventual victory of the Byzantines was due to the reforms (*islah*) that they implemented in their society and due also to the help given them by God (*is wajh se lazman ye ghalbah is wajh se in ko hasil hoga ke wo apne halat ki islah kar ke iraniyon ke muqabil mein apne ko allah ki madad ka mustahiq banayenge*, ibid). Islahi is explaining what happened in terms of general principles rather than because of the specific context in which it occurred.

A further conclusion that Islahi draws from these opening verses concerns international relations between Islamic and non-Islamic societies. He says

that the degree of cooperation that Muslim societies are prepared to extend to non-Muslim societies will be in direct proportion to the degree of correspondence that develops between the Muslim and the non-Muslim ways of thinking (*jo qaum apne nazariyat o 'aqaid aur fikr o falsafah mein islam se jitni hi qarib hoga bain alaqwami maidan mein musalmanon ki hamdardiyan dusron ke muqabil mein in ke sath itni hi ziyadah hogi*, ibid, pp. 75-76). By drawing such far-reaching conclusions, Islahi is allowing his perspective as a modern reader to take him well beyond the context at the time of revelation.

Another way in which Islahi draws general or universal conclusions is by articulating the various implied messages of a verse. For example, verse 21 says:

And among His wonders is this: He creates for you mates out of your own kind, so that you might incline towards them, and He engenders love and tenderness between you; in this, behold, there are messages indeed for people who think!

Islahi identifies four different messages that are contained in this verse. Firstly, he says that if God has created all things in the world in pairs, it follows that the world itself must be one of a pair. Hence, Islahi suggests that the present and the hereafter form a pair (*is dunya ka bhi ek jaura hai jis ko akhirat kahte hain*, ibid, p. 85). Secondly, Islahi states that God, who has enabled love and affection to appear among humanity, must himself be a God of love (*hamara khaliq nihayat miharban aur muhabbat karne wala hai*, ibid). Thirdly, he says that the harmony in creation points to the unity of God (*is ka khaliq o malik ek hi hai*, ibid). Lastly, the harmony in creation proves that those people, who say that the universe has evolved by itself, are wrong (*in logon ka khayal bilkul ahmaqanah hai jo samajhte hain ke is kainat ka irtiqa ap se ap hua hai*, ibid). However, it seems to me that these general conclusions represent only a few of the many conclusions that could be drawn from sustained reflection (*tadabbur*) on these verses.

Islahi draws similar conclusions from verse 22, which also refers to "messages":

for in this, behold, there are messages indeed for all who are possessed of (innate) knowledge!

The first message that Islahi finds in this verse is that, since the universe could not have come into existence without a purpose (*be ghayat o maqsud nahin ho sakti*, ibid, p. 86), a day of accountability will come to reward the just and punish those who did wrong (*lazm hai ke ek roz jaza aye*, ibid). The

second message is that differences among human beings should not prevent them from living together according to a single divine ordinance (*insanon ko ek hi khudai nizam ke taht zindagi basar karni chahiye*, *ibid*).

In the same way, Islahi identifies three further messages arising out of verse 24 (cf. *ibid*, pp. 87-88). Likewise, Islahi finds three messages in verse 37 (cf. *ibid*, p. 98). By formulating these messages, however, Islahi does not exhaust the number of conclusions that could be drawn from these verses.

In a similar way, Islahi uses very general terms to discuss the phrase from verse 30:

turning away from all that is false, in accordance with the natural disposition which God has instilled into man: not to allow any change to corrupt what God has thus created.

Islahi does not clarify what he means by terms like “the fundamentals of nature” (*mubadi fitrat*, *ibid*, p. 94) - simply presuming that the words are self-evident. Islahi makes the same presumption when he contrasts “those of sound mind” (*jo salim al tab' they*, *ibid*) with those whose nature is corrupt (*jinhone apni fitrat maskh kar dali thiy*, *ibid*) - simply presuming that these phrases are self-explanatory.

Further examples of the way Islahi moves beyond the specific context of Meccan society can be found in his discussion of verse 41:

(Since they have become oblivious of God,) corruption has appeared on land and in the sea as an outcome of what men's hands have wrought.

Islahi concludes that faith and *islam* are necessary in order to prevent corruption in society in general. For Islahi, *islam* means the true religion of the Prophet Abraham (*din-i-qayyim millet-i-ibrahim*, *ibid*, p. 91). Islahi says that without faith and *islam*, corruption is inevitable (*insani zindagi ke har shu'bah par fasad lazman mustauli ho ke rahega*, *ibid*). These conclusions apply at all times and places.

Moreover, Islahi makes a sweeping statement concerning scientific research on human gender from the phrase that occurs in verse 30:

not to allow any change to corrupt what God has thus created.

Islahi is of the opinion that scientific research on human gender change will result in nothing but corruption and chaos in society (*'aurat mard banane ke liye zaur lagae ya mard 'aurat banane ki khahishmand ho jaye, is qism ki sa'i namurad ka natijah bigar aur fasad ke siwa kuch aur nahin nikl sakta* . .

. *agarche wo ye inharaf 'ilm aur sains ke kitne hi buland bang o 'adi ke sath kare*, ibid, p. 95). He also makes sweeping statements about the views of "philosophers" (*falsafi*, ibid, p. 94) and accuses them of inventing their own kind of false philosophy (*batil ki hamayat mein falsafe bhi ijad kar dalta hai*, ibid). By making such general statements, Islahi has moved away from the specific context at the time of revelation. Besides, by using general terms like "mankind" (*insan ko allah ta'ala ne baihterin sakht aur baihterin fitrat par paida kiya hai*, ibid, p. 94), Islahi himself enters the field of philosophy.

The Way of God

In his discussions of previous Surahs in this Surah Group, Islahi made use of a concept known as "the way of God" (*sunnat-i-ilahi*) to achieve a more universal validity for the meaning of the text. In his discussion of the present Surah, Islahi has a similar purpose when he refers to God's way of providing various trials (*sunnat-i-ibtala*) in order to test mankind (*is qism ki azmaishen allah ta'ala ki is sunnat-i-ibtala ke taht pesh ati hai*, ibid, p. 97). However, instead of referring to "the way of God" (*sunnat-i-ilahi*), Islahi now refers to God's law (*qanun*). For example, Islahi says that verses 14-15 describe the "law of trial and temptation" that operates for those living in this world (*is dunya ka karkhana ibtila ke qanun ke taht chal raha hai*, ibid, p. 80). Moreover, in his discussion of verses 9-10, Islahi refers to God's law of justice and wisdom (*allah ta'ala ne hamesha qaumon ke sath apne qanun 'adl o hikmat ke mutabiq ma'mlah kiya hai*, ibid, p. 78). Likewise, Islahi says that verse 11 is an expression of the "law of reward and punishment" (*qanun-i-mujazat*, ibid, p. 78), which is an expression he repeats in reference to verses 17-18 (cf. ibid, p. 80).

Islahi says that God has dealt with all the Prophets in history according to the divine law (*sunnat*, ibid, p. 107) and that God deals with humanity according to an evident pattern in history (*tarikh ki roshni mein wazeh farmaya hai*, ibid) - a pattern that finds expression, for example, in verses 9-10 (*tarikh ke dalail ki taraf tawajjeh dilai hai*, ibid, p. 78). Islahi describes this historical pattern with concepts like "the way of God" (*sunnat*) or "the law of God" (*qanun*) and he has given a meaning to these concepts that supports his formulation of the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah.

Styles of Expression

Sometimes Islahi says that a word can have many meanings. For example, the word for “fear” in verse 28 can have many different meanings (*ye lafz wasi’ ma’non mein ist’emal hota hai*, ibid, p. 89). For Islahi, to say that words have different meanings seems to be the same as to say that the Qur’an uses different *styles*. For example, when the same topic is expressed in different words in the text of the Qur’an, Islahi says that a different *style* has been used (*ye mazmun pichhe mukhtalif uslubon se guzar chuka hai*, ibid, p. 96). However, he also refers to rhetoric as a style of expression (*in donon uslubon ki balaghat*, ibid, p. 105). In this case, the word “style” may be referring to a figure of speech, for example, a metaphorical use of words rather than an ordinary use of words. This seems to be Islahi’s intention when he says that verse 35 uses a particular style (*read: “figure of speech”*) to express scorn and anger (*is uslub-i-kalam mein tanz o tahqir aur ghaiz o ghazab sab jam’ ho jata hai*, ibid, p. 97). In short, Islahi uses the word *style* to refer to different meanings of the same word as well as to the differences between metaphorical and literal uses of a word.

In his comment on verse 27 of the Surah, Islahi explains how the Qur’an uses words in the way that human language uses words (*jo hamari zaban ke hain aur jin ko ham apne liye bhi bolte hain*, ibid, p. 89). This means that the Qur’an cannot express the nature of God without using a simile or a metaphor (*tamsili surat ikhtiyar kiye baghair ye siften hamari fahm se qarib nahin a sakti thiy*, ibid). Islahi seems to be saying that metaphorical language is inevitable when describing the qualities of the divine. In spite of his own admission regarding the necessity of metaphorical language, however, Islahi sometimes reverts to an explanation based on a *prima facie* or superficial understanding of the words. For example, the phrase from verse 25 says:

(Remember all this: for) in the end, when He will call you forth from the earth with a single call.

Islahi gives this phrase a numerical interpretation by stressing that God makes the call only once (*ek hi pukarna bilkul kafi hoga*, ibid, p. 88). This is to give the phrase a literal meaning as referring to a single call. A metaphorical interpretation would suggest that a single call is sufficient because God has supreme power to raise the dead.

Conclusions

Surah *Al Furqan* and Surah *Ash Shu'ara* have the same theme ('*umud*) because they form a pair. The former differs from the latter only in the style of expression and in the flow of the argument (*nahj istadlal aur uslub-i-bayan is ka sabiq surah se mukhtalif hai*, vol. 5, p. 495). Islahi makes the same comment about the pair of Surahs: *Ar Rum* and *Al Ankabut*. The difference between these two Surahs lies not in the theme, but in the style of expression (vol. 6, p. 69). It seems to me, however, that the theme cannot remain the same throughout an entire Surah Group if the style of expression keeps changing. Since the theme of a Surah must be intimately connected with the style of its expression, a change in one must have an affect the other. To insist that the same theme runs right through a Surah Group, independently of the style of the language used, is to disregard the significance of the language and style of the Qur'an.

Moreover, Islahi's discussion of the style of a Surah is unclear. Sometimes *style* refers to the way one word can have many different meanings (*mukhtalif uslubon*, *ibid*, p. 96). At other times, *style* refers to a figure of speech (cf. *ibid*, p. 97). Does *style* simply refer to changes in the meanings of words (according to differing contexts) or to a *specific way of communicating the meaning* by using a figure of speech? Islahi is aware of the difference between literal and metaphorical uses of words (*tamsili surat*, *ibid*, p. 89). In spite of recognizing this difference, however, Islahi does not provide a criterion by which to judge whether the Qur'an is using a word in a literal, *prima facie* or a metaphorical sense.

In his discussion of the opening verses of the Surah, Islahi draws conclusions about international relations between Islamic and non-Islamic societies. By drawing such far-reaching conclusions, Islahi allows his perspective as a modern reader to take him well beyond the context at the time of revelation. Islahi uses general concepts, such as "the way of God" (*sunnat-i-ilahi*) for a similar purpose. On the other hand, Islahi does not move beyond the specific context at the time of revelation in order to interpret many other verses. How does Islahi decide whether to move beyond the specific context in one particular case and not in others? Do not *all* the verses of the Qur'an allow the reader to transcend the specific context at the time of revelation and to interpret them from the context of the current situation in which he or she is living?

Islahi draws *four* specific messages from verse 21 (cf. *ibid*, p. 85) and *two* specific conclusions from verse 22 (cf. *ibid*, p. 86). Further, he discovers *three* messages from verse 24 (cf. *ibid*, pp. 87-88) and *three* messages from verse 37 (cf. *ibid*, p. 98). In this way, Islahi presents the content of these particular verses in a definitive way without considering the possibility that there may be other meanings contained in these verses.

Finally, Islahi's sweeping statements about the inadvisability of human gender change (cf. *ibid*, p. 95) as well as his generalizations about philosophers (cf. *ibid*, p. 94) are an expression of his own personal views. Yet he presents these views as the only correct interpretation of the Surah.

Surah Luqman

Introduction

Since this Surah has the same Qur'anic name as the previous two Surahs (*alif, lam, mim*, vol. 6, p. 115), it shares a common topic or theme with these previous Surahs (*'umud o mazmun mein fil jumlah ishtirak hai*, *ibid*). Moreover, just as the introduction to Surah *Al Baqarah* spoke of different kinds of people, the introduction to the present Surah describes the kind of person who benefits from blessing and grace and the kind of person who is deprived of it. The basic arguments for the religion of natural reason were provided by the previous Surah (*din-i-fitrati ki da'wat hai jis par . . . afaq o anfus ke dalail pesh kiye gaye hai*, *ibid*) and the present Surah offers the counsel of the well-known Arab sage, *Luqman*. According to Islahi, presenting the figure of *Luqman* is meant to remind Arab listeners that their own wise philosophers actually confirm the message of the Prophet. This means that common sense (*'aql salim*, *ibid*) supports the message of the Qur'an instead of taking sides with those who oppose it. Since the philosophers have discovered these same realities, the truths revealed by God must be in accordance with authentic natural reason (*asl fitrat*, *ibid*). Otherwise the philosophers could not have drawn the same conclusions as the Qur'an (*agar aisa na hota to ye suchne samajhne wale log in haqiqat tak kis tarah pahunchte?* *ibid*).

However, Islahi goes on to contrast the common sense ethics articulated by modern philosophy with that provided by the Qur'an. He says that modern philosophy has not been able to find the criterion to distinguish right from wrong (*in ki tamam falsafiyana kawishen na to neki aur badi ke imtiyaz ke liye koi kasauti mu'ayyin kar saken*, *ibid*) nor can it explain why mankind should do the right and avoid the wrong (*cf. ibid*). In contrast, the Qur'an not only puts ethics but the whole of religion on the firm foundation of natural reason (*din ki bunyad fitrat par rakhi hai*, *ibid*, p. 116). Even though mankind can follow the light of natural reason, a person can also misuse his freedom of choice to go against natural reason (*apni fitrat ki khilaf warzi bhi kar sakta*, *ibid*). The reason why God sent his prophets and his books into the world is to clarify the truths hidden in nature (*fitrat ke tamam muzmarat wazeh kar diye*, *ibid*) and to dispel all confusion so that the truths of natural reason would be available to everyone (*fitrat ki sidhi rah par chal kar*, *ibid*).

In this Surah, the reference to the wisdom of *Luqman* is meant to provide confirmation for the message of the Qur'an by having recourse to the testimony of a sage (*hakim ki shahadat*, *ibid*) who is well versed in the affairs of the world and whom even the opponents of the Qur'an acknowledge as a reputable philosopher. In addition, the evidence to be found in the natural environment (*afaq o anfus ke dalail*) for the truth of the Qur'an is presented in this Surah in a new way (*ek naye uslub se pesh kiye gaye hain*, *ibid*).

The Social Context

Islahi finds the key to the context for the opening verses of the Surah in verse 6:

But among men there is many a one that prefers a mere play with words (to divine guidance), so as to lead (those) without knowledge astray from the path of God, and to turn it to ridicule.

Islahi says that verses 8-9, which describe the reward prepared in heaven for the truly virtuous, were revealed because the unbelievers were ridiculing those who believed in God's promises (*yahan isi surat-i-hal ki taraf isharah firmaya hai*, *ibid*, p. 122). Islahi explains the stress on God's promises by referring to the actual situation of mockery (*is takid ki zarurat is wajh se thi*, *ibid*, p. 123) endured by poor Muslims living at that time (*is daur ke bebas aur gharib musalmanon ko*, *ibid*). Whereas these opening verses seem to describe people in general (*jo log*, *ibid*, p. 121, *baqi sare log*, *ibid*), these verses also describe in a more specific way the mocking unbelievers living at the time (*waqt ke mufasidin logon ko*, *ibid*, p. 122).¹⁹⁴ Islahi implies that verse 11 even makes a specific challenge to these mocking people (*ab batao ke tum is ke siwa dusri chizon ko jo pujte ho*, *ibid*, p. 124).

Similarly, Islahi attempts to place the figure of *Luqman* in the context of the Arab people living at the time of revelation. Though God had given knowledge and wisdom to some of their own philosophers and sages (*ahl 'arab ke samne khud in ke hukama aur in ki hikmat ko pesh kar ke ye dikana hai*, *ibid*, p. 124), the Arab people did not pay heed to them but blindly followed their own traditions (*lekin apne in aslaf ki hikmat se tum ne koi faidah nahin uthaya*, *ibid*, pp. 124-125). As a result, instead of instructing their children in the same way that *Luqman* provided sound advice for his

¹⁹⁴ Muhammad Asad, however, has a different view. He says that verse 6 is not a reference to a particular context or situation but "describes a type of mentality and has, therefore, a general import". Asad, (1980), p. 627, footnote 4.

son, the contemporary Arabs forbade their children from listening to the advice of their own philosophers and sages and even threatened them with cruel punishments (*inhi baton se aj tum apni aulad ko raukne ke liye nihayat zalimanah sazayen dete ho*, ibid, p. 125).¹⁹⁵ Islahi is saying that the advice given by *Luqman* to his dear son as related in Surah *Luqman* confirms the wisdom provided by the Arab philosophers and sages (*jin ki ta'lim tum ko ye par hikmat kitab de rahi hai*, ibid, p. 124). His description of the bad behaviour of the Arab people is based on the information contained in the advice that *Luqman* gives. We have here another example of the way Islahi discovers the context implied in the text of the Qur'an.

Islahi turns to Arabic literature for information about the identity of *Luqman*. He says that Arabic literature (*'arab ke litricher*, ibid, p. 125) confirms the fact that *Luqman* was a philosopher or sage (*ek hakim they*, ibid). Islahi says that *Luqman* was in a position of leadership (*in ko sardari ka mansub zarur hasil tha*, ibid) and that pre-Islamic poetry (*shay'rae jahiliyat*, ibid) confirms that *Luqman* ruled in Yemen (*yaman mein*, ibid). Moreover, the language of the Surah supports the view that *Luqman* had the responsibility of leadership (ibid). Not only was *Luqman* a leader, he was a sovereign ruler (*ek hakim nahin balke ek hukmran hakim they*, ibid, p. 133). Islahi draws this description of *Luqman* mostly from the text of the Surah.

Another illustration of the way Islahi finds the context implied in the text of the Surah is provided by his discussion of verse 33:

O men! Be conscious of your Sustainer, and stand in awe of the Day on which no parent will be of any avail to his child, nor a child will in the least avail his parent!

In these words, Islahi finds an allusion to the standard practice of the time according to which parents prevented their children from embracing Islam (*is daur mein bapon ki taraf se beton par in ko islam se raukne ke liye dabao dala ja raha ta*, ibid, p. 146). Islahi says that the previous Surah as well as verse 15 of the present Surah both make reference to the same practice (ibid). Islahi even gives three specific reasons why parents expected their children to follow the traditional practice of their elders (*tum hamare tariqah ki pairawi karte raho*, ibid). According to Islahi, these three reasons describe the cultural or social customs prevalent at the time of revelation and this verse is a direct rebuttal of these social customs (*ye ayat is bat ki tardid kar rahi hain*, ibid).

¹⁹⁵ There is no basis in the *hadith* or in Arab traditions that the Arabs forbade their children from listening to the advice of their own philosophers and sages and even threatened them with punishments if they did so.

Yet another way in which Islahi describes the context of the verses is to see the verse as the answer to a question raised by certain people living at the time of revelation. We find an example of this approach in Islahi's discussion of verse 34, the last verse of the Surah:

Verily, with God alone rests the knowledge of when the Last Hour will come.

Islahi says that this verse expresses the response to a question raised by the opponents of the Prophet (*ye 'itiraz ka bar sar mauqa' jawab hai*, ibid, p. 147). In other words, Islahi finds a clue to the context of the verse by understanding it as a response to a question (*is ke jawab mein farmaya ke is ke ane ka waqt sirf allah ta'ala hi ko ma'lum hai*, ibid).

Finally, Islahi usually discovers the context of a verse by identifying the persons to whom the verse is addressed. In this Surah, however, the only verse that Islahi connects directly with specific addressees is verse 32, which describes the fickle nature of the Quraysh (*ye quraysh ke mutarizin ko tanbih*, ibid, p. 145). It is noteworthy that Islahi had already identified certain verses with similar words in previous Surahs as addressed to the Quraysh. This may be the reason why he makes the same connection between verse 32 and the Quraysh in this Surah.

Transcending the Specific Context

Whereas Islahi recognizes various aspects of the actual conditions of the Muslim community to whom the message of the Qur'an was first preached (*is daur ke bebas aur gharib musalmanon ko*, ibid, p. 123), he does not hesitate to leave this specific context and move into a discussion of general aspects that involves *everyone* (*jo shakhs khuda ka shukr guzar rahta hai*, and *koi shakhs khuda ke haq mein dusron ko sharik karta hai*, ibid, p. 128). One of the ways in which he moves into this more general level of reflection is by positing general laws that have universal significance. For example, Islahi draws the general conclusion from verse 15 that this verse concerns the appropriate behaviour a believer should have towards his unbelieving parents:

“(Revere thy parents;) yet should they endeavour to make thee ascribe divinity, side by side with Me, to something which thy mind cannot accept (as divine), obey them not; but (even then) bear them company in this world's life with kindness, and follow the path of those who turn towards Me.”

Islahi says that the phrase “but (even then) bear them company in this world’s life with kindness” applies in all situations except where Muslim society has formally declared itself to be separated from the rest of society (*muslim mu’sharah jama’ti haisiyat se in se aur in ki qaum se bara’t ka ‘elan kar de*, *ibid*, p. 130). In this case, Islahi has interpreted the verse in terms of the subsequent historical realities of Muslim society rather than in terms of the context of the believers at the time of revelation.

Islahi demonstrates the same approach when he interprets verse 17 in terms of what any decent society would consider to be upright behaviour (*jo har achhi sosaiti mein ma’lum o ma’ruf hain*, *ibid*, p. 132). The same approach appears in his discussion of verse 21:

“Nay, we shall follow that which we found our forefathers believing in and doing.”

Islahi makes several observations about the way religion, culture and traditional customs can influence society (*ye haqiqat malhuz rahe ke qaumi din, qaumi tahzib aur qaumi riwayat ke na’ron mein bari kashish hoti hai. jo log ye na’re buland karte hain wo qaumi tahzib o riwayat ke muhafiz samjhe jate hain*, *ibid*, p. 139). In these reflections, Islahi does not limit himself to the context of the verses at the time of revelation but draws general conclusions that apply in every time and place.

Another way that Islahi transcends the specific context is by using topics or themes that function as a kind of umbrella bringing together many diverse verses under one theme. One such theme is that of reward and punishment on the Last Day. For example, Islahi explains the phrase from verse 15 according to this theme:

In the end, unto Me you all must return; and thereupon I shall make you (truly) understand all that you were doing (in life).

Islahi says that this phrase is addressed both to the parents and to the children mentioned earlier in the same verse (*ye khitab waladain aur aulad donon se yaksan hai*, *ibid*, p. 130). Since the verse had mentioned the possibility of idol-worship (*shirk*), Islahi explains the phrase: “I shall make you (truly) understand all that you were doing (in life)” as a reference to *punishment* and to *reward* in the next life (*wo is ki saza bhugatenge aur . . . silah payenge*, *ibid*). Islahi includes this verse under the single and general heading of “reward and punishment” whereas the verse may have several other meanings as well.

Similarly, he explains the next verse in terms of the doctrine of the Last Day (*tauhid ke ba'd dusra bunyadi 'aqidah akhirat ka 'aqidah hai*, ibid, p. 131). However, one could argue that verse 16 does not focus so much on the doctrine of the Last Day as on the omniscience of God:

“verily, though there be aught of but the weight of a mustard-seed, and though it be (hidden) in a rock, or in the skies, or in the earth, God will bring it to light: for, behold, God is unfathomable (in His wisdom), all-aware.”

It seems that Islahi uses the theme of the Last Day as a convenient umbrella to unite this verse with other verses. For instance, Islahi suggests the same theme of accountability on the Last Day as the best way to understand verse 28:

(For Him,) the creation of you all and the resurrection of you all is but like (the creation and resurrection of) a single soul: for, verily, God is all-hearing, all-seeing.

The main point of this verse, according to Islahi, is the ease with which God can reward or punish people according to their deeds (*is ko logon ka hisab karne aur in ko jaza ya saza dene mein koi zahmat nahin pesh ayegi*, ibid, p. 143). Yet the verse is not a statement about reward and punishment. Bringing different verses together under one heading or theme seems to serve the purpose that Islahi has determined beforehand, namely, to illustrate the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah about Prophethood and the Qur'an.

Furthermore, the way that Islahi brings several verses together under the one heading of idol-worship (*shirk*) may also be an attempt to demonstrate the wider meaning or theme (*'umud*) of the Surah. For instance, verse 20 speaks of the bountiful blessings of God but Islahi reduces the verse to a directive about idol-worship:

Are you not aware that God has made subservient to you all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth, and has lavished upon you His blessings, both outward and inward?

According to Islahi, the verse questions mankind about his preference for idols instead of God (*kis dalil se tum ne dusron ko sharik banaya aur in ki 'ibadat kar rahe ho!* ibid, p. 138). Islahi repeats the same question several times, using different words, in his discussion of this verse (cf. ibid). However, it is not self-evident that the main point of the verse is to ask this particular question. One could, for instance, read the verse as a reminder of mankind's responsibility concerning all that is in the heavens and on the

earth. Yet Islahi returns to the theme of idol worship repeatedly in his discussion of other verses in this Surah.¹⁹⁶

The attempt to provide more evidence for the theme ('*umud*) or meaning of the Surah appears in Islahi's choice of words that have a generalized or abstract meaning like "human nature" (*fitrat*, *ibid*, p. 121), "humanity" (*insan*)¹⁹⁷ and "consolation" (*tasalli*, *ibid*, p. 140)¹⁹⁸. These abstract concepts occur in the discussion of the specific historical context of the Surah. Another indication of this attempt to strengthen the theme ('*umud*) is the way Islahi groups the verses of the Surah conveniently under three headings: unity of God, the Last Day and prophethood (*tauhid, qayamat aur risalat . . . yahi masa'il quran ke usuli masa'il hain*, *ibid*, p. 142). Islahi classifies the verses of the Surah according to universal themes that all point in the direction of the one main theme ('*umud*).

Styles of Expression

The previous section highlighted the intrigues by which certain devious people living at that time (*jo waqt ke mufsid logon ko*, *ibid*, p. 122) tried to keep people ensnared in their misguided ways (*mukhalafin ki koshish ye thiye ke log inhi mazakharfat mein phanseye rahe jin mein phanseye hue hain*, *ibid*). It is noteworthy that Islahi finds evidence for the actual situation of these devious, misguided people (*logon ka hal ye hai*, *ibid*) in the *style of the language* used in the verses (*yahan isi surat-i-hal ki taraf isharah farmaya hai aur uslub-i-bayan izhar-i-ta'jjub ka hai*, *ibid*). Islahi's argument is that the expression of amazement (*uslub-i-bayan izhar-i-ta'jjub*, *ibid*) contained in the verses provides the key with which to describe the actual situation of these people.

According to Islahi, this kind of expression of amazement is to be found in verse 20:

Are you not aware that God has made subservient to you all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth, and has lavished upon you His blessings, both outward and inward?

The expression of astonishment (*andaz-i-kalam izhar-i-ta'jjub*, *ibid*, p. 138) arises from the fact that, having experienced the bountiful blessings of God,

¹⁹⁶ For example, Islahi resorts to the theme of idol worship to explain verse 22 (cf. *ibid*, p. 140), verse 25 (cf. *ibid*, p. 141) and verse 27 (cf. *ibid*, p. 142).

¹⁹⁷ The word for "humanity" (*insan*) is used three times on the same page. Cf. *ibid*, p. 129.

¹⁹⁸ The word for "consolation" (*tasalli*) is used again on p. 145.

people could still maintain that other deities had played a role in the creation of the universe. Islahi wonders what argument could justify people turning to other gods (*kis dalil se tum ne dusron ko sharik banaya aur in ki 'ibadat kar rahe ho!* ibid). Islahi has found the meaning of the verse in its style of expression.

We have another example of the way that Islahi draws important conclusions from the Qur'anic style of expression in his discussion of verse 13:

And, lo, Luqman spoke thus unto his son, admonishing him: 'O my dear son! Do not ascribe divine powers to aught beside God.

Islahi finds it very significant that the verse describes *Luqman* admonishing his son. Islahi concludes that *Luqman's* words to his son did not consist of a cursory piece of advice but that *Luqman* had chosen a special moment to convey this message to his son (*ek aham mauqa' par, khas ahtimam ke sath, bator ek mau'izat ke batayen*, ibid, p. 128). Islahi goes on to draw the attention of the reader of the Surah to the way a father should address his son (*is se maqsud quran ke mukhatabon ko tawajjeh dilana hai ke ek danishmand bap apne bete ko kiya ta'lim deta hai*, ibid). In short, Islahi has determined the context and the significance of this verse simply from the way one or two words are used.

A further indication of Islahi's way of drawing conclusions based on his perception of the style of expression appears in his discussion of verse 22:

Now whoever surrenders his whole being unto God, and is a doer of good withal, has indeed taken hold of a support most unfailing: for with God rests the final outcome of all events.

Islahi says that there is an original meaning of *islam* (*islam ki asl haqiqat*, ibid, p. 140) and a secondary meaning. In this verse, the secondary meaning of *islam* is intended, namely, "being humble before God" (*niyaz mandana mutawajjeh hone ke mafhum mein aya hai*, ibid). Since a person can show genuine or false humility (*haqiqi bhi ho sakta hai aur ghair haqiqi bhi*, ibid), the verse uses another word indicating sincerity (*muhsin*, ibid) in order to underline the distinction between people who are sincere and those who are hypocritical in their relation to God (*mushrikin o munafikin ki tarah nahin*, ibid). In short, Islahi finds that the verse refers to a group of people he describes as unbelievers and hypocrites from an analysis of the words used.

Islahi rejects the notion that verse 27 is a metaphorical expression:

And if all the trees on earth were pens, and the sea (were) ink, with seven (more) seas yet added to it, the words of God would not be exhausted: for, verily, God is almighty, wise.

According to Islahi, the style of expression used here is not hyperbolic but factual (*ye koi mubalaghah ka uslub nahin hai balke ye bayan haqiqat hai*, ibid, p. 142). Islahi finds support for his factual interpretation of this verse in the observation that, since human scientific knowledge is extremely limited (*sains ki tamam taraqiyan ke bawajud*, ibid), it cannot explain the mysteries of the universe. Islahi seems to be saying that only a factual or literal interpretation of this verse would respect the mystery or majesty of God.

Similarly, Islahi's comment on verse 34 also depends on the insignificance of human scientific discovery as compared with the mysteries of the universe:

Verily, with God alone rests the knowledge of when the Last Hour will come; and He (it is who) sends down rain; and He (alone) knows what is in the wombs: whereas no one knows what he will reap tomorrow, and no one knows in what land he will die.

Verily, God (alone) is all-knowing, all-aware.

Comparing it with God's knowledge, he dismisses scientific knowledge as pure speculation (*zan o takhmim se ziyadah kuch bhi nahin hai*, ibid, p. 147). Islahi does not consider many people would have the kind of sensitivity for language that is needed (*zaban ka zauq rakhne wale jante hain*, ibid, p. 146). However, a comparison between human science and God's knowledge is not necessarily intended by the verse.

The Appeal to Reason

While discussing some verses in the light (*is roshni mein*) of the context and the style of expression, Islahi prefers to interpret other verses according to a logical way of reasoning. For example, verse 9 says:

For He alone is almighty, truly wise.

Without referring to the context or to the style of expression, Islahi develops the logical argument that God must be all-powerful in order to reward the good and to punish the evildoers. If God could not do this, he would not be all-powerful (*is ke ma'ni ye hue ke na wo 'aziz hai na hakim hai*, ibid, p. 123). This is a kind of rational argument that Islahi uses repeatedly in his commentary (*is tarz-i-istadlal ki wazahat is kitab mein jagah jagah ho chuki hai*, ibid). Islahi does not consider the possibility that what may seem quite

rational in one particular context may not appear so rational in another. Moreover, a person can appeal to his own way of reasoning to justify a particular approach or way of thinking. Islahi's appeal to reason needs more clarification.

Furthermore, Islahi states that any person of average intellect can understand the meaning of verse 10:

He (it is who) has created the skies without any supports that you could see, and has placed firm mountains upon the earth, lest it sway with you, and has caused all manner of living creatures to multiply thereon.

His argument is that any person of average intellect must conclude that the creator of the universe is almighty (*ek mutawasit darja ki 'aql ka admi bhi, ye e'tiraf karne par majbur hai*, ibid). Islahi says that the argument from reason is so obvious that there is no basis for rejecting it. Similarly, the following verse dismisses any rational argument that the unbelievers may present (*zalimon ke pas . . . koi dalil to hai nahin*, ibid, p. 124). Islahi reduces the argument to one of simple logic.

Conclusions

In his introduction, Islahi says that the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah is basically the same as the previous two Surahs but that the present Surah has a new style (*ek neya uslub*, ibid, p. 116). It is not clear, however, how the expression of surprise (*uslub-i-bayan izhar-i- ta'jjub*, ibid, p. 122) makes the style of this Surah so different from other Surahs, which also express various emotions. Islahi does not indicate what is so significant about the style of this Surah since his primary concern is to confirm the theme already established earlier. He discusses questions of style in the light of the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah.

Islahi's method is to discover the context by reflecting on what is implied in the text of the Surah. For instance, his description of the bad behaviour of the Arab people is based on the information contained in the advice that *Luqman* gives. Islahi does not acknowledge that he is reading the text of the Surah from his own point of view and with his own purpose in mind. Hence, the description that he gives of the context is an expression of his own interpretation of *Luqman*.

For example, Islahi gives three reasons why Arab parents expected their children to follow the traditional practice of their elders and he says that these three reasons describe the cultural or social customs prevalent at the time of revelation (*is daur mein*, ibid, p. 146). What evidence does Islahi give to show that this was indeed Arabic cultural practice and not simply an expression of Islahi's own perception of their culture?

Again, Islahi finds a clue to the context of verse 34 by understanding it as a response to a question (*is ke jawab mein farmaya*, ibid, p. 147). Since the question itself emerges from Islahi's own interpretative effort, the answer to the question must be a result of the same interpretative effort. Hence, the context that Islahi describes is the result of his own perception and he does not investigate the possibility of other contexts.

Islahi interprets verse 15 (respect for parents) in terms of the subsequent historical realities of Muslim society rather than in terms of the context of the believers at the time of revelation. He does the same when he explains verse 17 in terms of what any decent society would consider to be upright (*jo har achhi sosaiti mein ma'lum o ma'ruf hain*, ibid, p. 132). In other

words, Islahi interprets these verses in the light of the wider context of the historical periods *after* the Islamic society in Medina. Most of the Surah, however, is interpreted exclusively against the background of the time of revelation. Islahi moves beyond the specific situation of the time of revelation whenever he finds it useful to do so. He does not provide any explanation about the occasions when certain verses could be situated in the wider context of subsequent history. This lack of clarity limits his method of interpreting the Qur'an mainly to the context at the time of revelation.

Islahi also transcends the specific context by using topics or themes that function as a kind of umbrella to bring together many diverse verses under one particular title or heading, for example, reward and punishment. In this way, even though those verses acquire a more universal quality, Islahi simultaneously restricts their meaning to conform to that specific heading. All these headings are a product of his own mind.

Another way in which he brings verses together is by saying they all express a similar basic doctrine (*bunyadi 'aqidah*, *ibid*, p. 131). The tendency to group verses together is also evident in the way Islahi classifies verses under the heading of idol-worship (*shirk*) whereas these verses could have other meanings as well. Besides, Islahi uses abstract concepts (such as: *fitrat*, *tauhid*, *qayamat*, *risalat*) to collect and classify verses that could conveniently be seen as illustrating the main theme ('*umud*) of the Surah. Other abstract concepts that perform this function are: *itmam-i-hujjat* and *sunnat-i-ilahi*. In all these ways, Islahi is imposing his own conceptual framework on the Qur'an without analyzing or evaluating the interpretative activity in which he is engaged. Islahi simply assumes that his way of classifying these verses is the only objective method. However, it seems to me that Islahi's effort to classify these verses has been influenced by his desire to illustrate the thematic coherence of the Surah.

Finally, Islahi understands reason to be an abstract capacity (*tarz-i-istadlal*, *ibid*, p. 123) that exists in the same way in all human beings. Rationality, however, is always embedded in a particular context and becomes simply a tool of philosophical speculation if it is separated from its human context. Islahi does not make allowances for the fact that what may be considered rational in one historical context could be considered irrational in another. He does not consider the cultural, sociological and historical dimensions that influence the workings of human reason. Paradoxically, Islahi's appeal to human reason does not fully respect the complexity of human ways of

allahu alayhi wa sallam ke is da'we se tha ke ye kitab ap par allah ta'ala ki taraf se nazil ki jati hai, ibid, pp. 155-156). Islahi finds confirmation of this observation in the next verse:

And yet, they (who are bent on denying the truth) assert,
“(Muhammad) has invented it!”

Islahi identifies “the people” referred to in the next part of the same verse with the Arabs (*yahan 'qaum' se murad ahl 'arab hai*, ibid, p. 156):

(this) people to whom no warner has come before thee.

Islahi adds that the Arabs should have treasured the great gift of the Qur'an, which God had bestowed on them (ibid).

Similarly, Islahi says that verse 4 describes the mindset of unbelievers in that period (*ye mushrikin ke is khayal ki tardid hai*, ibid, p. 157) and gives a detailed description of their way of thinking. Islahi finds the same social context for verses 5-6, which contain an answer to the question raised by people of that period (*ye mushrikin ke is groh ki tardid hai jo is waham mein muhtala tha*, ibid, p. 158). According to Islahi, the verses are addressed to these people (*is groh ko mukhatab kar ke*, ibid) in answer to a question they were raising (*quran mein ba'z jagah ye sawal aya hai*, ibid). Again, verse 10 articulates the question in the minds of people of that period and expresses their situation (*mushrikin 'arab ka hal bhi yahi tha*, ibid, p. 162). It is clear that Islahi describes the context in terms of the text itself.

Another example of the “question and answer” style of the Surah is found in verse 3, which represents the answer to an accusation made by the opponents of the Qur'an (*is ilzam ka jawab quran majid ne mukhtalif pahlua se dia hai*, ibid, p. 156). Instead of giving a detailed answer to their objections, the verse provides a threatening response (*yahan koi tafsili jawab dene ke bajae nihayat sakht dhamki ke andaz mein da'we ko mazid muakkad kar dia hai*, ibid). Moreover, verse 5 contains an answer to a question:

He governs all that exists, from the celestial space to the earth; and in the end all shall ascend unto Him (for judgment) on a Day the length whereof will be (like) a thousand years of your reckoning.

Compared to verse 47 of Surah *Al Hajj*, Islahi says that this verse is an answer to the people's impetuosity and disbelief regarding the Last Day (*ye ayat 'azab ke liye logon ki jald bazi ki jawab mein warid hui hain*, ibid, p. 158). According to Islahi, verse 13 is also an answer to a question regarding the necessity for a free choice in faith (*ye in ke e'tiraf aur in ki darkhast ka jawab hai*, ibid, p. 163). These examples indicate that Islahi discovers the context of some verses by understanding them as *answers* to real *questions* and difficulties that arose among the people of that time.

Islahi devotes his entire discussion of verse 21 to an analysis of the socio-historical background of the verse:

However, ere (We condemn them to) that supreme suffering, We shall most certainly let them taste of a suffering closer at hand, so that they might (repent and) mend their ways.

According to Islahi, even though the verse is couched in general terms, the primary addressees were the Quraysh (*agarche 'am alfaz mein firmai gayi hain lekin in ke awwal mukhatab quraysh hi hain*, ibid, p.169). Islahi suggests that the battle of *Badr* was an occasion when the Quraysh began to experience the “suffering closer at hand” mentioned in this verse (*is 'azab-i-adana ka silsilah quraysh ke liye ghazwa badr se sharu' hua*, ibid). The conquest of Mecca would bring the Quraysh to the end of their strength and those intent on doing evil would be eliminated (*wo biltadrij khatm ho gaye*, ibid). Islahi concludes that the Quraysh did not undergo the inevitable punishment that had come to previous nations (*faislah kun 'azab nahin aya jis qism ke 'azab pichhli qaumon par aya*, ibid) because most of the Quraysh eventually believed in the Prophet. Islahi says that the final words of the verse: “so that they might (repent and) mend their ways,” indicates this. In short, Islahi understands the entire verse in terms of what happened to the Quraysh.

In contrast to verse 21, however, the primacy addressee of verses 23-24 is the Prophet himself (peace be upon him) whereas the intent is to warn his opponents (*is ka rukh mukhalafin o mukazabin ki taraf hai*, ibid, p. 172). A further example of this Qur'anic style is verse 26:

(But) can, then, they (who deny the truth) learn no lesson by recalling how many a generation We have destroyed before their time? – (people) in whose dwelling-places they (themselves now) walk about?

Islahi says that the verse is referring to the Quraysh who, in fact, were going about their trade and so must have been the people “in whose dwelling-places they (themselves) now walk about” (*quraysh apne tijarati safaron mein in qaumon ki barbad bastiyon par se barabar guzarte they*, ibid, p. 174). Islahi says that this phrase is a direct reference to the practice of the Quraysh who were doing precisely what the phrase indicates.

Transcending the Specific Context

Islahi says that the first three verses of the present Surah show that the Qur'an came as a warning. The verses that follow present this warning in a more detailed fashion (*ab ye isi ki tafsil a rahi hai*, ibid, p. 157). Islahi

gathers these details together under two headings: the unity of God and the Last Day (*inzar ka khas mauzu' do chizen hain – ek tauhid dusri qayamat*, ibid), claiming that the Qur'an itself warns the people according to these two topics (*ayat zer-i-bahas aur ba'd ki chand ayaton mein tauhid ka bayan hua hai. is ke ba'd qayamat aur ahwal-i-qayamat ka zikr ayega*, ibid). These were the main topics that the Prophet and the Qur'an dealt with so they illustrate the theme ('*umud*) that Islahi has formulated for this Surah.

Islahi illustrates the theme ('*umud*) by stressing the human capacity for free choice based on verse 9 (*is ayat se ye bat wazeh hoti hai*, ibid, p. 161):

And then He forms him in accordance with what he is meant to be, and breathes into him of His spirit.

Islahi says that human beings possess a “divine spark” (*nur-i-yazdani*, ibid), which distinguishes them from the animal world, for animals lack this “divine spark” (*wo nur-i-yazdani se mahrum hain*, ibid) and human beings' ability to choose freely depends on maintaining this “divine spark” (*is ko barhana ya ghatana insan ke apne ikhtiyar par munhasir hai*, ibid). Islahi develops his notion of human freedom from verse 13:

Yet had We so willed, We could indeed have imposed Our guidance upon every human being: but (We have not willed it thus – and so) that word of Mine has come true: “Most certainly will I fill hell with invisible beings as well as with humans, all together!”

From this verse, Islahi selects the theme of free choice (*us ne logon ko ikhtiyar dia ke wo imtehan kare ke kaun apni 'aql o basirat se kam le kar iman ki rah ikhtiyar karta hai*, ibid, p. 163). For Islahi, human beings may choose the way of God or that of Satan (*insan ko khuda ne ye azadi di hai ke wo chahe to rahman ki rah ikhtiyar kare aur chahe to shaytan ki rah ikhtiyar kare*, ibid, p. 164). In other words, these verses highlight the theme ('*umud*) about accepting the Prophet (peace be upon him) and his message.

Another example of the way Islahi finds confirmation for the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah is his comment on verse 24:

And (as) We raised among them leaders who, so long as they bore themselves with patience and had sure faith in Our messages, guided (their people) in accordance with Our behest.

According to Islahi, this verse¹⁹⁹ draws on the evidence of history in order to show that God entrusts with leadership those people who accept his messages (*is se ma'lum hua ke qayadat o imamat kitab ilahi ke lazmi samrat*

¹⁹⁹ Islahi refers to several parallel verses for this verse. Cf. ibid, p. 172.

mein se hai, ibid, p. 173). The general law that Islahi articulates here is that God gives victory to a nation that is obedient to the Qur'an (*is ko qaumon ki imamat hasil rahti hai aur is ke dushman is ke age zayl o pamal hote hain*, ibid). This general law of history has been discussed in Surah Group Three (*tarikh ki roshni mein mubarhan kiya hai aur an hazrat salla allahu alayhi wa sallam aur ap ki sahaba ko basharat di hai ke agar wo sabit qadam rahe to bilakhir kamyabi inhi ko hasil hogi*, ibid, p. 170). Islahi makes it quite clear that the Qur'an proclaims good news to the Muslims and reminds them of their future responsibilities while pointing to the Jews as an example of what happens to those who reject the Prophet (*musalmanon ke liye basharat aur mustaqbil ki 'azim zimmadariyon ki yad dahani bhi hai aur waqt ke yahud par ta'riz bhi ke wo kiya banae gaye they aur ab kiya ban ke rah gaye hain*, ibid, p. 173). While the theme ('*umud*) of Surah Group Three stresses the victory of the Prophet and defeat of the Quraysh, the present Surah Group highlights the response to the Prophet and the message of the Qur'an.

In conclusion, Islahi offers three general conclusions for the present Surah based on a phrase from verse 26:

In this, behold, there are messages indeed: will they not, then, listen? The first message or conclusion is that God will surely punish those nations who do not accept God's messenger. The second conclusion is that God will punish these people not only in the afterlife but also in this world (*is dunya mein bhi 'azab deta hai*, ibid, p. 174). The third conclusion is that God will allow those people who follow the truth with perseverance to have leadership over others (*in logon ko qayadat o imamat ke mansub par sarfaraz farmata hai jo pure istiqlal ke sath haq ka sath dete hain*, ibid). Such general conclusions are in keeping with Islahi's tendency to summarize the message of the Surah under a few headings.²⁰⁰ For example, he says that verse 16 speaks of prayer and spending on others. Islahi says that these points, together with faith, epitomize the whole of religion (*inhi do par pure din ki 'amarat khari hoti hai*, ibid, p. 167). This propensity to draw general conclusions and to summarize in a few points is a characteristic of Islahi's style of interpretation.

²⁰⁰ I noted this approach of Islahi especially in my discussion of Surah *Al 'Ankabut* and of Surah *Ar Rum*. Cf. my section on "Transcending the Specific Context" in my discussion of these two Surahs.

The Way of God

We have seen in discussions of earlier Surahs that Islahi makes frequent use of a general concept or law that he calls “the way of God” (*sunnat-i-ilahi*) in order to move beyond the specific historical or social context into which the Surah is revealed. Islahi uses this concept again in the present Surah in connection with the second part of verse 3:

Nay, but it is the truth from thy Sustainer, enabling thee to warn (this) people to whom no warner has come before thee, so that they might follow the right path.

Islahi explains that the Prophet’s duty to “warn (this) people to whom no warner has come before thee” is an expression of “the way of God” (*sunnat-i-ilahi*, *ibid*, p. 156) whereby God gives a nation ample time to reform itself. After this time has elapsed, a nation can only expect punishment (*agar is ke ba’d bhi wo apne riwayat ki islah nahin karti to ek khas had tak muhlat dene ke ba’d allah ta’ala is ko lazman tabah deta hai*, *ibid*). Islahi says that he has often made reference to “the way of God” in his commentary (*cf. ibid*). He refers to this concept again in connection with verse 22:

And who could be more wicked than he to whom his Sustainer’s messages are conveyed and who thereupon turns away from them? Verily, We shall inflict Our retribution on those who are (thus lost in sin!

According to Islahi, punishment must come to those who will not accept the messenger that God has sent (*jo log is akhri zari’ah tazkir o tanbih se bhi na jage ab sunnat-i-ilahi ke taht in ke jugane ke liye koi dusri chiz baqi nahin rah gayi hai*, *ibid*, p. 169). Islahi says explicitly that this pattern of history is mentioned frequently in this commentary (*kisi qaum mein rasul ki ba’sat ke ba’d allah ta’ala is qaum ke sath jo ma’mul karta hai is ki wazahat ham is kitab mein jagah jagah karte aye hain*, *ibid*).

Reward and Punishment

Islahi is intent on forming a correct image of God (*khuda ki sahih ma’rifat*, *ibid*, p. 166) and is aware that a believer’s understanding of God can be faulty (*insan khuda ke bab mein aisi ghalat fahimiyon mein muhtala ho jata hai*, *ibid*). The image of God that emerges from Islahi’s discussion of this Surah highlights reward and punishment. Verses 7-9 extol the work of the

Creator of this wonderful universe. However, Islahi understands these verses to be pointing to the need for a day of final accountability when almighty God will reward the good and punish those who did evil (*pas zarur hai ke is ke ba'd ek aisa din aye jis mein wo haq o batil mein imtiyaz kare. in logon ko jaza de jinhone is ki ni'maton ka haq pahchana aur in logon ko saza de jinhone is dunya mein . . .* ibid, p. 160). Similarly, verse 10 describes the astonishment of those who are told that they will be restored to life in a new act of creation. Commenting on this verse, Islahi repeats almost verbatim what he had said about the previous verses (*is wajh se zaruri hai ke is ke ba'd ek aisa din aye jis din har shakhs apne 'amal ki jawab dahi ke liye apne rab ke hazur hazir kiya jaye aur wo jaza ya saza paye*, ibid, p. 162). The theme of reward and punishment is a dominant theme for Islahi because it accords with the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah.

In fact, Islahi introduces the next section containing verses 15-22 by summarizing it under the same kind of heading about reward and punishment (*ab age ki ayat mein ye bataya hai ke kis qism ke log hain jo is kitab par iman la rahe hain . . . aur jo log is ki mukhalafat kar rahe hain wo dunya aur akhirat donon mein kis anjam se duchar hone wale hain*, ibid, p. 164). Moreover, in the next and final section containing verses 23-30, the same conclusion emerges from Islahi's discussion. For example, verse 23 says:

And, indeed, (O Muhammad,) We did vouchsafe revelation unto Moses (as well): so be not in doubt of (thy) having met with the same (truth in the revelation vouchsafed to thee).

According to Islahi, the context indicates that the pronoun from the phrase "*min liqa'hi*" actually refers, not to "*al kitab*" (revelation) but to the warning about the day of retribution or punishment given earlier in verses 21-23 ("*min liqa'hi*" *mein zamir ka marja' siyaq o sabaq dalil hai ke "al kitab" nahin balke wo yaum-i-intiqam ya yaum-'azab hai*, ibid, p. 171).²⁰¹ Islahi explains that, just as those who rejected Moses were punished, so will those who reject the revelation (*al kitab*) brought by the last Prophet (peace be upon him) be punished as well (*is ki takzib karne walon ko bhi ham dunya aur akhirat donon mein saza denge*, ibid, pp. 171-172).²⁰²

²⁰¹ In Islahi's discussion of verse 23, we have another example of the significance of a pronoun. Islahi disagrees with those who say that *al kitab* is a reference to revelation in general. For Islahi, the pronoun of the word *faja'alnahu* refers to the Torah (*ye lafz jins kitab ke mafhum mein nahin balke taurat ke liye iste'amal hua hai*, ibid, p. 171).

²⁰² Islahi says that verse 24 contains the doctrine ('*aqidah*, ibid, p. 173) of reward and punishment and he finds the same theme reiterated in verse 29 (cf. ibid, p. 175).

Islahi makes critical remarks about earlier commentators who have not recognized this theme of reward and punishment, which Islahi says is clearly evident from the context (*siyaq o sabaq*) and is confirmed by several parallel verses in the Qur'an (*in nazair ki raushni mein ayat zer-i-bahas par ghaur kijiye to is ka har juz o puri tarah wazeh ho jayega. hamare mufasssirin ne is ko chunke is ke siyaq o sabaq aur is ke shawahid ki raushni mein nahin deka is wajh se is ki tawil mein in ko bari uljhan pesh ayi hai*, *ibid*, p. 172). For Islahi, the meaning of the verse emerges from the context whereas the context itself emerges from the theme of the Surah.

Conclusions

If the Surah is Meccan, there can be no role in it for the Jews. Yet Islahi alludes to the protests that the Quraysh and the Jews were making regarding the divine origin of the Qur'an (*quraysh aur yahud donon*, *ibid*, p. 155). Besides, Islahi refers to the Quraysh in general whereas only the leaders of the Quraysh were raising such issues. Furthermore, Islahi mentions the battle of *Badr* (*ghazwa badr*, *ibid*, p. 169) and the conquest of Mecca without adding that these events occurred some time *after* the revelation of this Surah.

Islahi understands verses 5-6 as representing an answer to the question raised by people of that period (cf. *ibid*, p. 158). Similarly, verse 13 is also an answer (*jawab*, *ibid*, p. 163) to a question raised by people living during the period of revelation. Islahi reflects on the implications contained in these questions and proceeds to describe the background to these verses. However, it seems to me that the questions and the answers that Islahi discovers in these verses are the result of his own interpretative effort. Other questions and other answers could be formulated.

Islahi says that verse 21 is addressed to the Quraysh (cf. *ibid*, p. 169) and he thereby restricts the scope of this verse to one particular group of people in history. He restricts the scope of verses 23-24 (cf. *ibid*, p. 172) and verse 26 (cf. *ibid*, p. 174) in a similar way. Islahi fails to mention the universal implication of these verses.

A characteristic quality of Islahi's approach to interpretation is to summarize the message of a Surah according to several headings. For example, he gathers verses together according to topics like the unity of God and the Last Day (cf. *ibid*, p. 157). He also groups verses according to the heading of "reward and punishment". The reason for the selection of these verses according to such headings or topics is to illustrate the theme (*'umud*) of the Surah. I find that Islahi imposes his own classification on the verses of the Surah by grouping them according to his version of the theme of the Surah.

Islahi does not discuss the question as to why God punishes some and not all of the evildoing nations in the world. Why are some nations punished *in this world* and other nations, which also deserve punishment, punished only in the next life? Furthermore, Islahi does not seem to consider the image of a "punishing God" to be anthropomorphic. Understanding the Qur'an in the

light of modern psychology would suggest that punishment and hell could better be understood in terms of the consequences of one's own behavior rather than as the retribution of an avenging God.

Finally, although Islahi considers each Surah Group to have its own theme, it seems to me that these various themes are all aspects of the same general theme. Accordingly, Surah Group Three stresses the victory of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the defeat of the Quraysh whereas Surah Group Four highlights the response given to the Prophet (peace be upon him) and to his message in the Qur'an. These themes are only different aspects of the same general theme.

Surah Al Ahzab

Introduction

Islahi begins his discussion of this Surah with a preface entitled: “the ‘*umud* of the Surah, its relation with the Group as a whole and the time of its revelation” (*surah ka ‘umud, grup ke sath is ka ta’alluq aur zamana nuzul*, vol. 6, p. 179). He goes on to say that just as Surah *An Nur* has a unique function as the particular Surah that brings Group Three to completion (*takmila o tamtamah ki haisiyat rakhti hai*, *ibid*), so the present Surah has the same function in Surah Group Four (which began with Surah *Al Furqan*).²⁰³ Surah Group Four seeks to confirm the Qur’an (as a divine book) and also to confirm Prophethood (as authentic) (*quran o risalat ke isbat mein hai*, *ibid*). The present Surah makes several points with this purpose in mind:

1. The Surah encourages the Prophet (peace be upon him) to fulfill the responsibilities that God has entrusted to him as the Messenger.
2. The Surah describes the last Prophet’s distinctiveness and special position among all the Prophets and Messengers (*anbiya o rasul ke tabqah ke andar ap ko jo imtiyaz khas*, *ibid*).
3. The Surah clarifies the kind of relationship that the last Prophet (peace be upon him) has with the community and the Surah also elaborates on the rights (as well as the demands that flow from these rights), which he can expect from the community (*ummat par ap ke haquq aur in ki muqtaziyyat*, *ibid*).
4. The Surah explains the position of the Prophet’s chaste wives in the community (*hazur ki azwaj mutahharan ka darja ummat ke andar*, *ibid*) and the special kind of relationship that the Prophet has with his wives.
5. The Surah makes reference to the profound trust (*is ‘azim amanat ka hawalah*, *ibid*) that God bestowed on humanity and to the fact that God revealed the Qur’an in order to clarify the nature of this trust. The Surah is a reminder of the rights and duties contained in this profound responsibility (*is ‘azim zimmadari*, *ibid*).

Islahi says that the Surah was revealed at a time (*ye surah is daur mein nazil hui hai*, *ibid*) when hypocritical men and women were manipulating the

²⁰³ It is true that Surah *An Nur* and Surah *Al Ahzab* are very similar from the point of view of chronology of revelation, subject matter and style. For this reason, these two Surahs could be considered a pair of Surahs.

reforms advocated by the Qur'an (*quran ke ba'z islahat ko bahana bana kar*, ibid) to stir up propaganda against the Prophet. These people even tried to poison the minds of the chaste wives of the Prophet. The Surah makes a reference to the revolt (*in fitnon ki taraf bhi isharat hain*, ibid) that took place at the time of the Prophet's defensive war against the onslaught of allied clans (*ahzab*) when these hypocritical people (*munaḥḥikin*, ibid) tried to break the Muslims' resolve (*musalmanon ko bad-dil karne ke liye*, ibid). Finally, the Surah clarifies the event involving two persons (*hazrat zayd aur hazrat zaynab*, ibid) because the hypocrites were using this event to stir up mischief (*ḥitnah angezi ka zara'e bana liya tha*, ibid).

Islahi admits that he felt uneasy as he approached this Surah because it is one of the more difficult Surahs in the Qur'an (*ye surah quran hakim ki mushkil suraton mein se hai*, ibid, p. 282). His subsequent discussion does not indicate the special difficulties of the Surah.

The Specific Context

The opening verse of the Surah is addressed through the Prophet to those who opposed him:

O Prophet! Remain conscious of God, and defer not to the deniers of the truth and the hypocrites: for God is truly all-knowing, wise.

Hence, at the outset, the Surah provides information about the social context by sending a message to those in the community who were working against the Prophet (*anhazrat salla allahu alayhi wa sallam ko khitab kar ke mukhalafin ko tanbih ki gayi hai*, ibid, p. 185). Islahi makes explicit mention of the plural form of the verb in verse 2 (*bi ma ta'malun*) to show that verses 2-3 are directed to the whole community of believers through the Prophet (*anhazrat salla allahu alayhi wa sallam se jo khitab hai ye ummat ke wakil ki haisiyat se hai. jis se ye haqiqat wazeh hui ke din ke ma'mle mein yahi raush musalmanon ko bhi ikhtiyar karni chahiye*, ibid, p. 186). In other words, right from the start, two important points are made: the social context is highlighted and the whole community is identified as the addressee of these first two verses.

Islahi understands the verses that follow to be providing further pieces of evidence that contribute to the formation of a more comprehensive picture regarding the social context in which the Surah was revealed. Verse 4 is also interpreted in view of this context:

Never has God endowed any man with two hearts in one body.

This phrase refers, according to Islahi, to efforts being made by the two-faced hypocrites in the community to discredit the Prophet's reforms (*quran ki islahat ko kuffar o munafikin ne an hazrat salla allahu alayhi wa sallam ke khilaf fitnah angezi ka zara'e bana liya tha*, ibid, pp. 186-187). Islahi goes on to explain the way that, just as a person cannot function with two separate wills (*mutanaqaz irade apne andar jam' kar rakhe*, ibid, p. 187), in the same way a community needs to develop harmony among its members (*tamam irade bilkul ham ahang o ham rang hone chahiye*, ibid). Islahi says that the rest of the verse concerns the reforms initiated by the Prophet (peace be upon him) and opposed by these same hypocritical members of the community (*ab quran ne is jahiliyat ki jo islah ki to munafikin o kuffar jhar ke kanton ki tarah paighambar ke pichhe par gaye hain*, ibid). Islahi sees the whole verse as a direct rebuttal of the objections made by the hypocrites concerning reforms recommended in the Qur'an (*kiya kiya mafasid maujud hain jin ki quran ne islah ki hai*, ibid, p. 188). Similarly, the matter concerning the marriage of Zayd and Zaynab should be seen as a reform advocated by the Qur'an to get rid of an inappropriate social custom (*ta ke is ghalat rasm ka khatamah ho jaye*, ibid).

Islahi makes an effort to find out more about the people addressed in the verses of this Surah. For example, verse 10 must be referring to the hypocrites mentioned earlier:

(Remember what you felt) when they came upon you from above you and from below you, and when (your) eyes became dim and (your) hearts came up to (your) throats, and (when) most conflicting thoughts about God passed through your minds.

Islahi identifies the people referred to in this verse as a specific group among the believers. He says that, even though the grammatical form indicates a general category of people, the verse actually refers to the hypocrites who were active among the believers during the war of the confederates (*ye bat agar che 'am sighah se farmai gayi hai lekin is se murad wo log hain jo zau'f-i-iman aur nafaq ki bimari mein muhtala they*, ibid, p. 199). Islahi distinguishes this group from that of the true believers, mentioned later in the Surah (*jab sachhe musalmanon ka ye hal bayan hua hai . . . to ayat zer-i-bahas ka isharah inhi logon ki taraf ho sakta hai, jo zau'if al iman they*, ibid, p. 200), rejecting all other accounts of this event which say that most of the fighters were of weak faith (cf. ibid).

Islahi finds clear evidence in the text of verse 13 pointing to a group of Bedouin hypocrites (*qarina dalil hai ke yahan isharah munafikin-i-e-rab ki*

taraf hai, ibid, p. 201), describing these people as interested only in the advantages they could obtain from the political strength of Islam (*ye log islam ki barhti hui siyasi taqat se mar'ub ho kar . . . lekin in ki sari dilchaspi apne mufadat se thiy*, ibid). They behaved just as those people did who, during the battle of the trench, joined in the fighting so they would not lose face and because they were bent on breaking the resolve of the Muslims (*apna bharm qaim rakhne ke liye a gaye they. lekin unhone apna sara zaur musalmanon ka hauslah past karne ke liye sarb kiya*, ibid). Since the Bedouin had doubted that the Muslims' supremacy would last very long (*islam aur musalmanon ka qabza is shahr par 'arzi hai*, ibid, p. 202), the Qur'an now exposes their real frame of mind (*quran ne in ke is batin se pardah utha dia hai*, ibid). Further evidence (*qarina*) in the text of verse 14 allows Islahi to say that the reference in the opening phrase of the verse: "Now if their town had been stormed" is not to their *town* but to the *houses* mentioned in the previous verse (*qarain ki roshni mein mere nazdik is ka marja' buyut hai*, ibid). They were preoccupied about their own houses rather than about the safety of the community.

Another contextual approach to the meaning of a verse that Islahi uses is to view the overall tone or thrust of a verse (*siyaq-i-kalam*). For example, verse 17 clearly expresses a warning:

Say: "Who is there that could keep you away from God if it be His will to harm you, or if it be His will to show you mercy?"

For, (do they not know that) besides God they can find none to protect them, and none to bring them succour?

Hence, the second part of the verse should be interpreted according to the sense of warning expressed in the first part (*yahan siyaq-i-kalam chunke tanbih ka hai is wajh se tanbih ke pahlū ko khas taur par numayan farmaya*, ibid, p. 202). Another example of this approach can be found in Islahi's discussion of a phrase from verse 19:

Yet as soon as the danger has passed, they will assail you (believers) with sharp tongues, begrudging you all that is good!

Since the overall context is the attitude taken by the hypocrites during the war of the confederates, Islahi says that the words "with sharp tongues" refers to the avarice with which these people, who considered themselves Muslim soldiers, fought over the plunder (*agar mal-i-ghanimat hath aye to is ki tam' mein ye zaban ke ghazi sab ko hadif-i-muta'n ban dalenge*, ibid, p. 206). In this way, Islahi places the phrase in its proper context.

Islahi also indicates that the context (*mauqa' o mahal*) determines the particular meaning of a word, especially when that word has many possible meanings. For example, the word *nahba* in verse 23 can have any one of the following meanings: resolve, purpose, promise etc. Imam *Bukhari* has said that the meaning is “covenant”, which, according to Islahi, is the correct meaning according to the context (*ye tafsir lafz ki ruh aur mauqa' o mahal ke muqtaziyat ke bilkul mutabiq hai*, *ibid*, p. 210).

Islahi also refers to the social context of the Surah in terms of its *background* (*in ayat ka pas manzar*, *ibid*, p. 215). He disagrees with earlier commentators who describe the background of verses 28-29 in terms of the conditions of prosperity that existed in Medina after the conquest of Mecca,²⁰⁴ prompting the wives of the Prophet to articulate their own expectations of a more comfortable life (*azwaj ne bhi ap se mutalabah kiya ke in ko bhi zindagi ki rahaton aur zinaton se mutamatt'a hone ka mauqa' dia jaye*, *ibid*, pp. 215-216). Earlier commentators are of the opinion that verses 28-29 were revealed as a reprimand for the wives of the Prophet (*in ke is mutalabah par bataur-i-'itab ye ayat nazil huen*, *ibid*, p. 216). Islahi dismisses this “occasion of revelation” as unsuitable for several reasons (*ye shane nuzul hamare nazdik qabil-i-tawajjeh nahin hai*, *ibid*), insisting that we need to examine the real conditions that existed at the time in order to understand the true context of these verses (*ham yahan is surah ki roshni mein waqt ke baz khas halat ki taraf isharah karenge jin se in ayat ka sahih mauqa' o mahal samajhne mein madad milegi*, *ibid*).

Basing his own comments about the situation into which these verses were revealed on an overview of the whole Surah, Islahi highlights the influence of the hypocrites on the nascent community (*is puri surah par tadabbur karne se ma'lum hota hai ke is daur mein munafikin ki resha dawaniyon . . . bahut barh gayi thiy*, *ibid*). Islahi says that the hypocrites were even directing their mischief at the private life of the Prophet (*gharelu zindagi ke sukun ko darham barham karne ke liye bhi bari khatarnak muhim chala rakhi thiy*, *ibid*). He goes on to describe at length how some women were telling the wives of the Prophet that they were missing out on the comforts of life and that, if the Prophet divorced them, the wealthy and the leaders of society would soon marry them and make them the envy of others (*bare bare rais aur sardar ap logon se nikah karenge aur ap logon ki zindagiyan qabil-i-rashk ho jayenge*, *ibid*). Islahi says that later verses will describe

²⁰⁴ These verses refer to the prosperous conditions that existed in Medina *before* the conquest of Mecca.

how wicked intrigues were instigated by visits to the homes of the Prophet's wives (*waswasah andazi ki zarur koshish karte*, *ibid*, p. 217) and he draws on similar evidence provided in Surah *An Nur* (cf. *ibid*).

Islahi says that verses 28-29 were revealed into this situation (*ye halat they jin mein ye ayat utri hain*, *ibid*). Instead of addressing the hypocrites directly, these verses are addressed to the Prophet and to his wives (cf. *ibid*). Islahi says that sometimes a reprimand in the Qur'an is not meant for the persons to whom the verse is addressed but to someone else (*is mein koi 'itab muzmar hota hai to is ka rukh kisi aur taraf hota hai*, *ibid*). We need to reflect on these verses with this background in mind (*ye pas manzar ko samne rakh kar*, *ibid*) in order to understand the real purpose of the Qur'an, which, in this context, is twofold. Firstly, the Qur'an put an end to the underhand doings of the hypocrites in the community (*quran ne . . . munafikin ki in resha dawaniyon ka hamesha ke liye sadde bab kar dia*, *ibid*, p. 218) and secondly, the Qur'an established the sincerity of the wives of the Prophet (*azwaj mutahharat sab bila istasna allahu o rasul aur akhirat ki talib thiy*, *ibid*).

Similarly, verse 30 is addressed to the Prophet's wives (*barah-i-rast azwaj-i-nabi razi allahu 'anhum mukhatab kar ke*, *ibid*, p. 219) but the verse must be understood according to its social context, namely, the persistent underhand conduct of the hypocrites:

O wives of the Prophet! If any of you were to become guilty of manifestly immoral conduct, double (that of other sinners) would be her suffering (in the hereafter): for that is indeed easy for God.

Instead of understanding this verse to be suggesting the possibility of immoral conduct on the part of the wives of the Prophet, Islahi says that the verse reminds these wives of their profound responsibility on account of their high status (*in ka darjah o martabah bhi bahut uncha hai aur . . . in ki zimmadariyan bhi bahut bhari hain*, *ibid*) and warns them of the evil purposes of the hypocrites (*munafikin o mufsad ke makhfi iradon ko*, *ibid*). Islahi says that the hypocrites were bent on spreading scandal in the community to discredit the believers (*musalmanon ki akhlaqi sakh barbad ho*, *ibid*). Hence, Islahi brings out the meaning of the verse by placing it in the social context of the Surah.

A similar view of the social circumstances of the time allows Islahi to interpret verse 32 according to the need for caution:

O wives of the Prophet! You are not like any of the (other) women, provided that you remain (truly) conscious of God. Hence, be not over-soft in your speech, lest any whose heart is diseased should be moved to desire (you): but, withal, speak in a kindly way.

The phrase: “any whose heart is diseased” refers to the evil intentions of the hypocrites (*wo kinah o hasad murad hai jo ashraf munafikin . . . apne dilon mein rakhte they*, *ibid*, p. 221). In a similar way, Islahi interprets the next verse as indicating that certain women at the time were trying to evoke the same desires and longings in the hearts of the wives of the Prophet as they found in themselves (*munafik ‘auraten . . . isi tarah ke arman paida karne ki koshish kar rahi thi jis tarah ke arman in ke apne dilon mein they*, *ibid*). So the verse tells the wives of the Prophet (*azwaj nabi razi allahu ‘anhum ko khatib kar ke*, *ibid*, p. 222) to avoid these temptations by remaining indoors, whereas the actual purpose of the verse is to show contempt for the prevalent customs of society (*waqt ki begumat ke riwayat par ta’riz aur in ki tahqir hai*, *ibid*). Islahi argues that the wives of the Prophet would never be tempted to go outdoors according to the fashion of contemporary society (*jahiliyyat ki ‘auraton ki tarah*, *ibid*). Islahi is convinced, contrary to the opinion of many earlier commentators (*hamare mufasarin*, *ibid*) that the verse proclaims the end of that corrupt society, which the hypocrites were hoping would outlast the appearance of Islam (*is jahili tahzib ke khatm hone ki taraf ishara hai jis ko munafikin o munafikat . . . ye umid liye baithe they ke . . . ye baqi rahegi*, *ibid*). Islahi’s understanding the social context enables him to make some specific conclusions (*cf. ibid*, p. 223). We shall discuss these conclusions in the following section.

Transcending the Specific Context

As we saw in Islahi’s discussions of previous Surahs, he is also intent here on the basic or core teaching of the Surah. Regarding verse 33, this basic teaching has already emerged from the foregoing analysis of the specific context according to Islahi (*is ayat ki asl ta’lim ki wazahat to upar ki satron mein ho chuki hai*, *ibid*, p. 223). But he adds the following points by way of conclusion:

1. The first is that a woman’s principal area of activity is inside her own house (*ek ye ke ‘aurat ka asl dairah kar is ka ghar hai*, *ibid*).
2. The second point is that a woman who leaves the house with her face made up does not represent progress (*‘auraton bana o singar kar ke gharon se bahar niklna tahzib ki tariqi ki nishani nahin hai*, *ibid*).

3. The verse is a categorical statement (*nas qat'i*, *ibid*) with parallels throughout the Qur'an (*is ki naziren bhi maujud hain*, *ibid*). But the verse may not be applied to anyone other than the wives of the Prophet (*kisi aur ko murad lena ki koi gunjaish nahin hai*, *ibid*). The verse may only apply to others in a derived or implied sense (*dusron ki shumuliyat is mein ho sakti hai to aslan nahin balke tab'an o zamnan ho sakti hai*, *ibid*).

Since Islahi does not clarify what he means by the phrase “in a derived or implied sense”, it remains unclear how verse 33 can refer to anyone other than the wives of the Prophet.

Furthermore, verse 34 is also clearly addressed to the Prophet's wives:

And bear in mind all that is recited in your homes of God's messages and (His) wisdom: for God is unfathomable (in His wisdom), all-aware.

Yet Islahi makes general statements about the role of women in the home, which are intended for all believing women (*jis tarah mardon ki rahnumai ke liye hui thi is tarah 'auraton ke liye bhi hui thi*, *ibid*). His observations about the division of “private” and “public” life (*cf. ibid*) and the special “mission” (*cf. ibid*, p. 224) of the wives of the Prophet are meant for all women. Specifically, the duty of the Prophet's wives in the home (*agar tumhari duty gharon ke andar se muta'alliq hai*, *ibid*) is meant to be a mirror for a woman's duty during every period and culture. Significantly, Islahi says that verse 35 is also addressed to the wives of the Prophet but is meant for all sections of Islamic society (*khitab khas taur par azwaj mutahharat se hai, niz maqsud islami mu'sharah ke ajzae tarkibi ko batana hai*, *ibid*). The question remains as to what extent a verse addressed to a certain group of people in the past can have such universal implications.

Islahi provides a lengthy discussion in his commentary on verse 50 that stipulates the kind of marriage the Prophet (peace be upon him) was allowed to embark on. Islahi begins by referring to the objections of the hypocrites regarding the Prophet's marriage to *Zaynab*, namely, that the Prophet (peace be upon him) had one law for himself and another for the community (*munaafikin ne . . . ye e'tiraz bhi utaya ke ap ne apne liye alag shari'at bana rakhi hai*, *ibid*, p. 254). Whereas the Muslims were told to limit their wives to four, the Prophet (peace be upon him) was exempted from this restriction (*ap ne apne ap ko is pabandi se bala rakha*, *ibid*). Basing his description on accounts external to the Qur'an (*riwayat se ma'lum hota hai*, *ibid*, p. 255), Islahi repeats what he had said earlier about the more comfortable life-style

available for the wives of the Prophet if they divorced the Prophet and married prominent citizens instead. In contrast, Islahi describes the simplicity of the Prophet's household and the demands that were made of the Prophet's wives who were expected to sacrifice themselves entirely for the Prophet's mission (*apni zindagi ka har arman qurban kar dene ke liye taiyar hon*, ibid). With these conditions in mind, Islahi concludes that the Prophet could marry any women who were prepared to live in such simplicity and with such commitment (*is wajh se allah ta'ala ne . . . hazur ko ye ijazat di*, ibid).

As regards permission to marry more than four wives, this was necessary for religious and social considerations (*dini aur milli masala ki khatir ye ijazat ap ko 'ata farmai hai*, ibid, p. 256). Islahi holds that verse 50 was revealed after the Prophet's marriage with Zaynab (*zainab ke nikah ke ba'd nazil hui hai*, ibid, p. 257) as a response to the doubts and suspicions that were being raised in the minds of the community (*dusre nek niyat logon ke andar bhi shubahat paida karne ka imkan tha. is imkan ke sadde bab ke liye allah ta'ala . . . wazeh farma dia*, ibid). In short, Islahi explains the special permission given to the Prophet (peace be upon him) regarding his marriages, as it is articulated in verses 50-52, in terms of the social and religious context of the community (*ye sare nikah aslan maslahat-i-din ke liye they*, ibid). Since the primary function of the Prophet's marriages was religious (*peghambar ke sath in ka asl ta'alluq sirf miyan biwi ka nahin balke khidmat-i-din ka hai*, ibid, p. 258), the Prophet's marriages were different in kind from the rest of the community. The Prophet needed the freedom to relate with his wives according to the demands of his busy life (*apne masruf lamhat mein se peghambar jo kuch jis ko bakhsh denge wo isi par qana't karenge*, ibid). Since this was a special privilege for the Prophet, Islahi explains the reason for this privilege in terms of the social and religious context of the time. He makes no attempt to relate these verses to the life of the community today.

As we have seen, Islahi views all these verses in the light of the context at the time of revelation. However, he suddenly launches into a description of conditions in the modern world during his discussion of verse 53. While the first part of the verse clearly refers to the attitude of the hypocrites in the past (*is ke pas pardah wohi munafikin hain*, ibid, p. 263), Islahi discusses the second part in terms of present circumstances:

And (as for the Prophet's wives,) whenever you ask them for anything that you need, ask them from behind a screen: this will but deepen the purity of your hearts and theirs.

Disregarding the wives of the Prophet as the obvious addressees of this verse, Islahi turns to the condition of mankind in general (*dil hi wo chiz hai jis par insan ki tamam akhlaqi sehhat ka inhisar hai*, ibid, p. 264). More explicitly, Islahi discusses modern attitudes to dress (*is zamane ke mudda'iyān-i-tahzib apne kapron ki safai ka to bara ehtimam rakhte hain*, ibid). In the next paragraph, however, Islahi abandons these general observations and returns to the specific context (*zahir hai ke ye munafikin hi they*, ibid, p. 265).

Another interesting example of an attempt by Islahi to extend the application of a specific injunction about the veiling of women to the present day is to be found in his discussion of verse 59:

O Prophet! Tell thy wives and thy daughters, as well as all (other) believing women, that they should draw over themselves some of their outer garments (when in public): this will be more conducive to their being recognized (as decent women) and not annoyed. But (withal,) God is indeed much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace!

Islahi begins by explaining the past context of the verse. He says that, during that period, there were people who were making various excuses to take advantage of women (*is zamana mein medina mein . . . sharir logon ke liye 'azr ke mauaq'e bahut they*, ibid, p. 270). The veiling of women frustrated the evil designs of these people (*is qism ke bahanon ki rah masdud ho gayi*, ibid). Yet Islahi goes on to assert that the injunction about the veiling of women was not meant to be only a *temporal* precaution (*ye ghalat fahmi na ho ke ye ek waqti tadbir thiy . . . aur ab is ki zarurat baqi nahin rahi*, ibid). It is true that laws are always revealed in a particular situation (*sab muharrikat ke taht hi nazil hue hain*, ibid) but this does not mean that these laws can be disregarded as soon as the situation has changed (*wo muharrikat na hon to wo ahkam kal 'adam ho jayen*, ibid). In short, the veiling of women is a clear injunction in the Qur'an (*quran majid mein is ka hukm nihayat wazeh alfaz mein maujud hai*, ibid, p. 269) about which there need be no further doubt (cf. ibid). Islahi adds that the need for chastity is all the more evident in today's world (cf. ibid, p. 270). In this discussion, Islahi has moved from the specific to the general and from a context in the past to that of the modern world without averting to the changes in discourse that must take place.

The Way of God

As we saw in discussions of previous Surahs, Islahi uses a concept he calls the completion of revelation (*itmam-i-hujjat*, *ibid*) in order to explain the Day of Judgment and the reward and punishment that follows (*is itmam-i-hujjat ke baghair agar allah ta'ala logon ko in ki gumrahi par saza deta to ye chiz is ke 'adl o rahmat ke khilaf hoti*, *ibid*).²⁰⁵ Furthermore, in order to discuss the universal implications of the Surah, Islahi makes use of another concept called “the way of God” (*sunnat-i-ilahi*). This concept throws light on those verses that speak of the trials that believers must endure. For example, verse 11 expresses God’s way of testing the faithful (*ye imtehan allah ta'ala ki sunnat hai*, *ibid*, p. 200). Similarly, verse 22 says that the way to success is to endure the trials that precede it (*kamyabi ki manzil ko pahunchne se pahle in ko nihayat sabr azma imtehanon se guzarna parega*, *ibid*, p. 209).²⁰⁶ According to verse 24, the trials that afflict mankind are in accordance with “the way of God” (*allah t'ala ki mashiyat is ki hikmat aur is ki sunnat ke mutabiq hai*, *ibid*, p. 210).

The idea of “the way of God” (*sunnat-i-ilahi*) and the accompanying concept of the completion of evidence for belief in the message of the Qur’an (*itmam-i-hujjat*) clarify the verses related specifically to the wives of the Prophet. Since the last Prophet (peace be upon him) brings the fullness of revelation in person (*rasul itmam-i-hujjat ka sab se bara zari'ah hai*, *ibid*, 220), his wives will be subject to strict accountability (*is wajh se in se mauakhazah sakht hoga*, *ibid*). Islahi relies on the concept of “the way of God” to explain and to justify what the Qur’an says in relation to the wives of the Prophet (*allah ta'ala ki sunnat yahi hai aur ye bilkul mabni bar 'adl o hikmat hai*, *ibid*).

Moreover, verse 38 is a source of personal consolation (*tasalli*, *ibid*, p. 237) for the Prophet (peace be upon him) because the trials he endures are in keeping with “the way of God” (*ye allah ta'ala ki sunnat hai*, *ibid*). These trials provide a useful training for the Prophet (peace be upon him) and are all part of God’s plan (*is tarah ki mushkilat jo pesh ati hain ye in ki tarbiyat aur imtehan ke liye pesh ati hain aur thik thik khuda ke muqarrar kardah*

²⁰⁵ Islahi refers the reader to verse 24 and to verses 37-40 of this Surah for further discussion of this concept (cf. *ibid*, p. 192). He also draws the reader’s attention to his discussion of verse 165 of Surah *An Nisa*.

²⁰⁶ To illustrate this concept (“the way of God”) even further, Islahi refers to verse 214 of Surah *Al Baqarah* and to verses 2-3 of Surah *Al Angkabut* (*isi sunnat ki taraf*, *ibid*, p. 209). Moreover, verses 38 and verse 62 of this Surah make special references to this concept.

program ke mutabiq pesh ati hain, ibid). In conclusion, these two concepts help to reinforce the theme (‘*umud*’) of the Surah by explaining the situation of the Prophet (peace be upon him) in relation to his wives and in relation to the mission entrusted to him through the Qur’an.

Sources External to the Qur’an

Islahi’s style of writing in this Surah seems to have been influenced by the books of history and tradition that he mentions, for his description of the context of these verses is very detailed and specific. This is especially clear from his discussion on verse 26:

And He brought down from their strongholds those of the followers of earlier revelation who had aided the aggressors, and cast terror into their hearts: some you slew, and some you made captive.

This verse is a reference to the particular historical occasion when a decision was made to kill all fighting men and to take the rest into captivity (*hazrat sa’d ne faislah kiya ke in ke tamam qabil-i-jang afrac qatl kar dia jayen aur baqiyah ko laundi ghulam bana liya jaye . . . isi waqi’ah ki taraf ayat mein isharah hai*, ibid). In his comments on this verse, Islahi draws on historical sources (*tarikhon se ma’lum hota hai*, ibid, p. 211) and on accounts of traditions (*riwayat se ma’lum hota hai*, p. 212) in order to explain what actually happened. The facility with which Islahi draws on these sources *external* to the Qur’an contrasts with his insistence that all material external to the Qur’an be examined meticulously before it is used to understand the Qur’an.²⁰⁷ It also contrasts with his persistent dismissal of the *hadith* and the occasions of revelation (*shan-i-nuzul*).

²⁰⁷ Besides the above two references to external sources of information that Islahi makes, I have noted that Islahi frequently makes similar references to books of tradition (*riwayat*) in his discussion of this Surah. Cf. ibid, pp. 198, 199, 200, 202, 217, 236, and 250.

Conclusions

Islahi says the Surah was revealed at a time (*is daur mein nazil hui*, p. 179) when certain hypocritical men and women were stirring up propaganda against the Prophet (peace be upon him). But there is no evidence in the text to support this observation. Neither is there any evidence for his remark that these hypocrites were telling the wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him) to marry wealthy men (cf. *ibid*, p. 216). Besides, Islahi explains verses 28-30 by referring to these same hypocrites. These verses were addressed to the Prophet (peace be upon him) and his wives, however, and they have no relation with hypocritical men or women.

In this Surah, Islahi describes the specific context in various ways in order to bring out the kind of protest that the hypocrites were making during that time (*is daur mein*, *ibid*, 216). He highlights the context with phrases like *qarina dalil hai* (*ibid*, p. 201) and *siyaq-i-kalam* (*ibid*, p. 202) to show how the meaning of a verse can be found by looking at its overall tone and thrust. When a word has several possible meanings, a true understanding of the context (*sahih mauqa' o mahal*, *ibid*, 216) will produce the correct meaning. Furthermore, the background (*in ayat ka pas manzar*, *ibid*, 215) of a verse can throw light on its correct meaning. For this reason, the background of verses 28-29 show that the Surah is not rebuking the chaste wives of the Prophet but rather is protesting at the corrupt customs of society at that time. Islahi dismisses the usual "occasions of revelation" used to explain these verses (*ye shane nuzul hamare nazdik qabil-i-tawajjuh nahin hai*, *ibid*, p. 216) and prefers to examine the particular conditions (*khas halat*, *ibid*, p. 216) of society at that time.

Islahi explains the special privileges for the Prophet (peace be upon him) with regard to marriage, according to verses 50-52, in terms of the social and religious context of the time. Since the primary function of the Prophet's marriages was religious (*peghambar ke sath in ka asl ta'lluq sirf miyan biwi ka nahin balke khidmat-i-din ka hai*, *ibid*, p. 258), the Prophet's marriages were different in kind from the rest of the community. Islahi makes no attempt to relate these verses to the life of the community today. However, Islahi says that verse 35, which is addressed to the wives of the Prophet, is meant for all sections of Islamic society (*khitab khas taur par azwaj mutahharat se hai, niz maqsud islami mu'sharah ke ajzae tarkibi ko batana hai*, *ibid*). By reflecting on the background and purpose of the verses, Islahi

concludes that some verses are meant only for the Prophet (peace be upon him) while other verses have a universal significance.

Islahi asserts that the injunction about the veiling of women in verse 59 is not meant to be only a *temporal* precaution (*ye ghalat fahmi na ho ke ye ek waqti tadbir thiy . . . aur ab is ki zarurat baqi nahin rahi*, ibid). It is true that laws are always revealed in a particular situation (*sab muharrikat ke taht hi nazil hue hain*, ibid) but this does not mean that these laws can be disregarded as soon as the situation has changed (*wo muharrikat na hon to wo ahkam kal 'adam ho jayen*, ibid). In short, the veiling of women is a clear injunction in the Qur'an (*quran majid mein is ka hukm nihayat wazeh alfaz mein maujud hai*, ibid, p. 269). In this discussion, Islahi has moved back and forth from the specific to the general and from a context in the past to that of the modern world. He insists that some laws about women in the Qur'an are clear and valid without the need for further investigation into their meaning for the changed conditions of the present world. With regard to these laws about women, Islahi considers them self-evident and sees no need for interpretation.

Islahi uses concepts like *sunnat-i-ilahi* and *itmam-i-hujjat* to explain and to justify the instructions regarding the chaste wives of the Prophet. These concepts help to place verses dealing with a specific situation in a wider framework. Hence, verses dealing with a specific context can be seen from a universal point of view. According to Islahi, these two concepts clarify the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah by explaining the situation of the Prophet (peace be upon him) in relation to his wives and in relation to the special mission entrusted to him through the Qur'an. Islahi has used his own conceptual framework to interpret the Qur'an.

Finally, Islahi draws on historical sources (*tarikhon se ma'lum hota hai*, ibid, p. 211) and on accounts of traditions (*riwayat se ma'lum hota hai*, p. 212) in order to explain several verses of the Surah. The facility with which Islahi draws on these sources *external* to the Qur'an contrasts with his insistence that all material external to the Qur'an be examined meticulously before it is used to understand the Qur'an. It also contrasts with his persistent dismissal of the *hadith*, the occasions of revelation (*shan-i-nuzul*) and with the fact that he relegated the other *external* principles of

interpretation to a secondary position in the work of understanding the Qur'an.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁸ Cf. vol. 1, p. 13. See also my general introduction where I raise the issue of the internal and the external principles of interpretation. Mustansir Mir has explained that the *external* principles of interpretation are secondary in importance compared with the internal principles of interpretation. Mir (1983), p. 44.

Introduction to Chapter Five

I have completed a detailed analysis of the first four Surah Groups of *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*. In this way, I have had a close look at the first forty Surahs of the Qur'an.

Space does not permit me to continue my study of Islahi's commentary in the same way for the remaining seventy-four Surahs of the Qur'an. So I have had to adjust my approach in this final chapter of my thesis.

I propose to give an overview of the remaining three Surah Groups (Surah Group Five, Six and Seven) and to provide my own conclusions after the overview of each of these Surah Groups. I will give an introduction to each Surah based on the introduction that Islahi provides in his commentary. In this introduction, I will present the arguments that Islahi gives for the coherence of the whole Surah Group based on the theme (*'umud*) of each Surah. In this way, I will investigate whether Islahi continues the same approach to the interpretation of the Qur'an that he adopted for the first four Surah Groups.

1. Surah Group Five

Introduction

This Surah Group discusses the three basic principles of the Islamic message: oneness of God, the Last Day and Prophethood (*tauhid*, *qayamat*, *risalat*, vol. 6, p. 285), which had already been mentioned in the previous Surah Groups. However, the style of presentation (*nahj istadlal aur uslub-i-bayan*, *ibid*) differs from previous Surah Groups. The general theme (*jami' 'umud*, *ibid*) of this Surah Group expresses the proofs for the oneness of God (*isbat-i-tauhid*, *ibid*) – a theme that appears in each Surah of this Group. Other topics appear under the heading of this general theme and are explained in terms of this general theme.

Surah Group Five contains sixteen Surahs: the first thirteen of them are Meccan and the final three are Medinan.

The Theme of the Surahs

Surah Saba

The first Surah in this Surah Group is *Saba*, which has as its theme the proofs for the oneness of God and for the Last Day (*is ka 'umud isbat-i-tauhid o qayamat hai*, *ibid*). Basically, it is concerned with the reasons for gratitude. The Surah is addressed to the Quraysh (*mukhatab mutrafin-i-quraysh hain*, *ibid*).

Surah Al Fatir

Since this Surah and the previous one make up a pair of Surahs, the basic theme of both these Surahs is more or less the same (*'umud mein koi khas farq nahin hai*, *ibid*, 347). The basic topic of the present Surah is also the oneness of God (*tauhid*, *ibid*) and it opens by stressing the praise that is due to God and by rejecting the divinity of the angels. Under the heading of the oneness of God, other topics like prophethood and the afterlife are also dealt with in accordance with the purpose of the Surah and with the demands of the time of revelation (*zamana nuzul*, *ibid*). The previous Surah had already rejected the divinity of the invisible beings and of the angels. By comparison, in this Surah the divinity of the angels is rejected more definitively because the unbelieving Arabs considered the angels to be the most important of their idols.

Surah Ya Sin

Islahi says that the basic theme of this and the preceding two Surahs is more or less the same (*'umud mein koi khas farq nahin hai*, *ibid*, p. 397). The same topics that were dealt with in the preceding two Surahs, such as the oneness of God, the afterlife and prophethood, are also dealt with in the present Surah. However, now these topics are discussed in more detail and the way in which they are presented is also different (*tafsil o ijmal aur nahj-i-istadlal ke 'itibar se farq hai*, *ibid*). The Surah elaborates on some aspects of the previous Surah and provides historical and natural arguments (*tarikhi aur fitri dalail se*, *ibid*). The Surah opens where the previous Surah left off, namely by mentioning some of the evidence for prophethood (*isbat-i-risalat*, *ibid*). Furthermore, from the point of view of the philosophy of religion (*falsafah din ke nuqtah nazar se*, *ibid*), the Surah is based on gratitude, as

were the previous Surahs. The coherence of the Surah (*is ka 'umud aur nazm, ibid*) is clear from an overview of its contents.

Surah As Saffat

This Surah forms a pair with Surah *Ya Sin* and there is no basic difference in the theme of the two Surahs (*koi bunyadi farq nahin hai, ibid, p. 449*). Moreover, the concepts of the unity of God, the afterlife and prophethood are all dealt with in this Surah as they were in the previous Surahs. However, the way of presenting the argument is different (*nahj-i-istadlal aur tartib-i-bayan mukhtalif hai, ibid*). The Surah highlights the oneness of God, which expresses the spirit of the whole Surah Group (*tauhid jo is pure grup ki ruh hai, ibid*) but makes a point of rejecting the divinity of the angels. Furthermore, issues concerning the afterlife are brought out according to the way the unbelievers discussed these matters with their leaders. Finally, the brief presentation that the Surah makes of the history of the Prophets describes how God destroyed those nations that rejected the Prophets and brought relief (*falah, ibid*) only to the Prophets and to those who became their followers.

Surah Sad

Like the previous Surahs of this Surah Group, the present Surah also has the unity of God as its foundation (*is surah ki bunyad bhi tauhid hi par hai, ibid, p. 507*). The Surah relates how the Quraysh, because of their pride and attachment to idolatry (*shirk parasti ke josh o junun mein, ibid*), refused to accept the Qur'an, which appeared among them as a profound reminder of the truth (*ek 'azim yad dehani hai, ibid*). However, the Quraysh remained completely unconcerned about the consequences of refusing the message of the Qur'an. They would only come to believe in it once they had faced the outcome of their rejection but then it would be too late.

Surah Az Zumar

This Surah forms a pair with the previous Surah. The Surah takes up from where the previous Surah left off. Surah *Sad* ended by saying that the Qur'an is a reminder for all those living in the world about the inevitable approach of the Last Day when all mankind would come before its Lord. Those who were still rejecting this message at the time of revelation would very soon come to see with their own eyes how its truth would be confirmed.

The opening passage of the Surah draws attention to the fact that God has revealed a book arranged in such a way that different views about the oneness of God could be resolved. Those who insisted on their imaginary gods could hear of the ultimate consequences of their belief even before the Last Day.

In view of this, the present Surah presents the arguments for the oneness of God, rejects all manner of idolatry (*shirk aur shurka ki tardid*, *ibid*, p. 555) and illustrates the way that unbelievers will be resurrected on the Last Day. The Surah is based on the oneness of God (*surah ki bunyad tauhid par hai*, *ibid*). In this connection, the coming of the Last Day is further clarified. Finally, the Surah belongs to those Surahs in the Surah Group that were revealed during the struggle between truth and falsity (*kashmakash-i-haq o batil ke is daur mein nazil hui hain*, *ibid*) when the time for the migration was drawing near. Subsequent Surahs will bring out this point more clearly.

Surah Mumin or Ghafir

The foundation (*bunyat*, vol. 7, p. 11) of this Surah, which concerns the unity of God (*tauhid*, *ibid*), is similar to the preceding Surahs of this Surah Group. The Qur'anic name for this Surah (*ha mim*) is that of the following six Surahs as well. The Surah dates from the time when the debates about idolatry (*tauhid o shirk*, *ibid*) were so severe that the Prophet and his followers were hard pressed in Mecca. An allusion to the approaching migration from Mecca (*hijrat*, *ibid*) had already been made in the previous Surahs but in this Surah it is made more clearly. Encouragement is given to those believers who had to fight and to those who were living in dangerous circumstances. Moreover, those who had not yet become involved in the struggle, which all believers had to undertake, were advised to leave their personal concerns aside (*maslahaton se beparwa ho kar*, *ibid*) and to trust that God would come to their aid in the fight for truth (*kalma haq ki sar bulandi ke liye ut khare hon*, *ibid*).

Surah Hamd al Sajadat or Fussilat

The basic theme (*asl mazmun*, *ibid*, p. 71) of this Surah is the same as the previous one. It presents arguments for the unity of God and provides a warning to those who were opposing the call to recognize the unity of God expressed in the Qur'an. Besides, the good news of eternal victory is given to those who remain firm in their belief about the unity of God, despite the

mischievous ways of their opponents. The Prophet (peace be upon him) is advised to deal patiently with his opponents, no matter how severe their opposition may be, for this approach will bring blessings and success.

Surah Ash Shura

The basic theme of this Surah is also the unity of God. It urges faith in one God by stressing that no one can avoid the supreme moment when he will have to appear before the one Lord of all.

The argument rests on the history of the Prophets from Adam to the present. Every Prophet was inspired by God and has brought the same message of the unity of God. The differences that arose among people about the message of God were not due to the message itself but due to the hostility and the antagonism that existed among them. The Qur'an has the task of discerning among these different perceptions and of proclaiming the truth. The Last Day will determine the fate of those who do not accept the message of the Qur'an.

This Surah was revealed just before the migration. Hence, the Prophet speaks to the leaders of the Quraysh as one who has fulfilled his obligations among them. It is now up to the people to respond. The Muslims were facing a period when, as a group (*hayat-i-ijtima'i ki shakl mein*, ibid, p. 133), they would have to take up a task for which they should be preparing themselves. The Prophet is told that his task to proclaim the truth among the people is now complete. Answers to a few objections to the Prophethood of Muhammad (peace be upon him) are also given.

Surah Zukhruf

Since this Surah forms a pair with the previous Surah, there is no basic difference between its theme (*'umud*) and the one preceding it. Like the other Surahs in this Surah Group, it refers to the Last Day in order to stress the importance of its subject matter (*markazi mazmun*, ibid, p. 199), which is the unity of God. The Surah rejects the divinity and the intercessory power of the angels as well as the claim of the Quraysh that they have inherited a religion of idol worship (*din-i-shirk*, ibid) from the Prophet Abraham.

This Surah highlights aspects of the Qur'an that were not brought out in the previous Surah in order to make it clear to the Quraysh that they will have to

bear full responsibility for their preference of worldly wealth over the message of the Qur'an.

Similarly, whereas the previous Surah provided answers to the objections of certain opponents, this Surah stresses that the invitation to embrace the religion of unity (*din-i-tauhid*, *ibid*) is in keeping with the invitation made by all the Prophets. Whoever rejects this invitation will experience the same destructive forces (*halakat ka saman*, *ibid*) as those nations experienced who rejected the earlier Messengers.

Surah Ad Dukhan

This Surah has the same Qur'anic name as the previous Surah and its opening verses express the same intention (*asl mudda'a*, *ibid*, p. 263) as the Surah preceding it. A distinctive mark of this Surah is that, besides the theme of the unity of God that it shares with the previous Surah, the dominant mood of the present Surah is one of warning. A profound reflection (*tadabbur*, *ibid*) on the whole Surah brings out the point that those who reject the Qur'an will have to bear the consequences of their rejection in this world and in the next. The history of the nations as well as reason and nature all confirm this conclusion.

Furthermore, the meaning of the last verse of the previous Surah (verse 89) is provided in the present Surah. Subsequent Surahs of this Surah Group will provide further clarification of this point (*mazmun*, *ibid*). In fact, the last Surahs of this Surah Group, which are Medinan, refer in unambiguous language (*bilkul qata'i alfaz mein*, *ibid*) to the dismissal of the Quraysh (*quraysh ke 'azl*, *ibid*) and the complete victory (*ghalba*, *ibid*) of the believers.

Surah Al Jathiyah

This Surah forms a pair with the preceding one in its introduction and in its basic meaning but it warns the Quraysh that every part of the world bears witness to the unity of God and to the coming of the Last Day. There is no reason for the Quraysh not to benefit from the enormous variety of evidence all around them. If they do not pay attention to any of this evidence, God will have to decide their fate.

Further, the Muslims are assured of victory (*fath o ghalba*, ibid, p. 297) and they are told to be patient a little while longer. Final victory will be theirs (*akhri kamyabi tumhara hi hissah hai*, ibid) provided they persevere. God will make up for all the sufferings they have to endure.

The Surah was revealed when the Jews were encouraging the Quraysh in their struggle against the believers. For this reason, the Surah also accuses the Jews in no uncertain terms that, by their shameful deeds, they have betrayed the trust that God had placed in them when God gave them the responsibility of leadership (*imamat ke jis mansub par faiz farmaya tha*, ibid). The Muslims receive the warning to remain on the path of light that God has provided for them and to beware of those who abuse religion (*in din bazon se hoshyar raho*, ibid). People like this will try to lead the Muslims astray in the same way that they themselves were led astray by the doctrines they invented.

Surah Al Ahqaf

This is the last Meccan Surah of this Surah Group. The following three Medinan Surahs are a fulfillment of the promises and threats contained in the foregoing Surahs. The Qur'anic name of this Surah as well as its introduction is the same as that found in the previous Surahs of the Surah Group. The Surah warns those who oppose the Qur'an of the inevitability of the Last Day. If they resort to their idolatrous practices and disregard this warning and if they make the Prophet out to be a liar, they should remember that the evidence of sound reason and tradition (*'aql o naql*, ibid, p. 337) does not support them. On the contrary, even before the revelation of the Qur'an, the Israelites could find prophecies attesting to the authenticity of the Qur'an in the Torah. Since the Jews and the Christians did not believe in their own Prophets and in their own Scriptures, their deceptive statements need not provoke the Muslims.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) is told not to be concerned about his opponents. It is the Prophet's task simply to communicate the message to the people. Those whose hearts are open to receive the truth will listen to it while those who are deaf and blind will either be fascinated by its message or close themselves entirely from its impact. The Prophet is told to perform his task with patience.

Surah Muhammad

The previous Surah was the last of the Meccan Surahs that are included in this Surah Group. The present Surah and the remaining two Surahs are Medinan. The present Surah follows on from the previous Surah without any introduction – as if the threat made to the unbelievers in the last verse of Surah *Al Ahqaf* is implemented in the present Surah.

It is clear from the previous Surahs of this Surah Group that the Quraysh and the People of the Book who had joined forces in the fight against truth (*batil ki hamayat mein larh rahe hai*, *ibid*, p. 387) could not find any support for their opposition either in the evidence of nature or reason (*afaaq o anfus aur 'aql o fitrat ke andar*, *ibid*) – nor could they find any support in the history of the Prophets or in the former Scriptures. However, until now there had been no one to counter their opposition.

Surah *Muhammad* and the following two Surahs proclaim that God has finally provided someone to uproot this opposition. Hence, all the efforts expended by the unbelievers to prevent people from taking the path of God will be in vain. Besides, the believers are told that their efforts in this world and in the next will have a powerful impact (*barawar honge*, *ibid*) provided they attend to their increasing responsibilities with determination and with enthusiasm.

Finally, the hypocrites are warned about their claim to have faith while acting in solidarity with the unbelievers and with the People of the Book. It is made clear to them that unless they cease from this hypocrisy and join forces with God and with his Prophet (peace be upon him) they will experience the same fate as had been decreed for the unbelievers.

Surah Al Fath

Verse 35 of the previous Surah holds out a promise to the believers that they would rise high in the end provided they did not lose heart while their adversaries would be crushed. The present Surah gives witness to the fulfillment of this promise (*waqi'ati shahadat hai*, *ibid*, p. 431).

The Surah opens with a reference to the Truce of Hudaibiyyah, which led the way to the victory of Mecca (*jo fatah makka ki tamhid*, *ibid*) and which

gave the Prophet (peace be upon him) and his followers access to the abundant blessings of God (*itmam-i-ni'mat ka fath-i-bab sabit hui*, *ibid*).

The Surah also refers to the prophecies made in the Torah and in the Gospels about the community of Muslims who would experience this victory (*is ummat ke bab mein*, *ibid*). The purpose is to inform both the believers and the non-believers that nothing was happening just by chance. On the contrary, all these events were ordained by God (*sab kuch allah ta'la ki eskim mein pahle se te hai*, *ibid*) and God's plan would be fulfilled since there was no power on earth to thwart it.

Surah Al Hujurat

According to Islahi, the same relationship exists between this Surah and the previous Surah *Al Fath* as exists between Surah *An Nur* and Surah *Al Muminun* of Surah Group Three. In other words, the present Surah complements the previous Surah (*zamimah o tamtamah hai*, *ibid*, p. 479).

The final verse of Surah *Al Fath* stated that:

Muhammad is God's Apostle; and those who are (truly) with him are firm and unyielding towards all deniers of the truth, (yet) full of mercy towards one another.

This sentence from verse 29 of Surah *Al Fath* explains the whole Surah (*puri surah isi tukre ki goya tafsir hai*, *ibid*) and so, by implication, explains the present Surah as well. These verses were very significant for the reform of society at the time of revelation (*is waqt musalmanon ke mu'share ki islah ke liye nihayat zaruri tha*, *ibid*). Islahi says that he has already explained how the laws and guidance provided by the Qur'an were in accordance with the demands of the period (*halat ke taqazon ke taht*, *ibid*) so that people could appreciate them. Accordingly, this Surah was revealed at a time when many new believers were embracing Islam. These people were making statements that indicated they understood neither the true status nor the dignity of the Prophet (peace be upon him) nor the responsibilities of belonging to an Islamic society. The Surah provides the guidance that was needed in this situation (*jo is waqt ke halat ke andar zaruri thiy*, *ibid*). Hence, most of the laws and the guidance provided in this Surah concern the mutual rights that the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the Muslims have towards each other. Since previous Surahs had already explained the attitude that the Muslims should adopt towards unbelievers, this Surah does not discuss relations with unbelievers.

Conclusions

This short overview of Surah Group Five has shown that Islahi continues his method of finding structural and thematic links between the Surahs by formulating a theme ('*umud*) that they all share and by interpreting all the Surahs of the Surah Group in the light of this one theme. Within the Surah Group, he pairs the Surahs either on the basis of a word, a phrase or an idea that two consecutive Surahs may have in common. Since his overriding concern is to show that all the Surahs of the Surah Group have the same theme, he does not investigate each Surah for its own particular characteristics but highlights everything that supports his formulation of the theme of Surah Group Five.

I do not think Islahi has found a specific theme ('*umud*) for Surah Group Five. Instead of having discovered the theme ('*umud*) of a complete and separate Surah Group, Islahi has articulated the theme of the whole Qur'an. However, Islahi says that the oneness of God is the spirit of Surah Group Five (*tauhid jo is pure grup ki ruh hai*, vol. 6, p. 449) and that its theme ('*umud*) is to provide proofs for the oneness of God (*isbat-i-tauhid*, *ibid*, p. 285). The basis of Surah *Sad* is the unity of God (*is surah ki bunyad*, *ibid*, p. 507) and the following Surah *Az Zumar* (cf. *ibid*, p. 555) many other Surahs of the Surah Group are based on the unity of God as well. Islahi keeps saying that the Surahs of this Surah Group do not have different themes ('*umud mein koi khas farq nahin hai*, *ibid*, p. 347).

Moreover, the last Surahs of the Qur'an are also concerned with the oneness of God, as was the opening of the Qur'an in its very first Surah (*allah ta'ala ne apni kitab ka aghaz bhi tauhid hi se farmaya aur phir us ka itmam bhi isi par kiya*, vol. 9, p. 655). As Islahi himself says, the oneness of God is the foundation of religion (*tauhid . . . tamam din ki bunyad hai*, *ibid*). Therefore, it cannot be the theme of one particular Surah Group in the Qur'an.

It is historically incorrect to say that Surah *Az Zukhruf* rejects the claim of the Quraysh that they have inherited the religion of idol worship (*din-i-shirk*, *ibid*, p. 199) from the Prophet Abraham. The Quraysh never made this claim. A further historical point concerns Islahi's statement that, in Surah *Al Jathiyah*, the Jews were encouraging the Quraysh in their struggle against the believers and that the Surah reprimands the Jews in no uncertain terms.

How can the Surah be concerned with any matter concerning the Jews if the Surah is Meccan?

Islahi attempts to establish a structural coherence among the Surahs of Surah Group Five by highlighting the way certain verses in one Surah explain or throw light on verses in another. For example, Islahi says that Surah *Ad Dukhan* explains the meaning of verse 89 in Surah *Zukhruf*:

Yet bear thou with them, and say, "Peace (be upon you)!" – for in time they will come to know (the truth).

The explanation lies in the victory of the Muslims in Mecca. Hence, structural coherence depends for its validity on thematic coherence.

Furthermore, subsequent Surahs of Surah Group Five also assure the Muslims of their victory (*fath o ghalba*, *ibid*, p. 297). Islahi says that several verses are addressed to the Quraysh and to the Jews, who will be defeated. He can say this only because he has understood these verses according to the particular theme of victory and defeat, which was the theme (*'umud*) of Surah Group Three, not the theme of Surah Group Five. In fact, the last few Surahs of Surah Group Five could be included in Surah Group Three.

2. Surah Group Six

Introduction

The general theme of the Surah Group is the Day of Resurrection (*jami' 'umud ba's o hashr o nashr hai*, vol. 7, p. 527). This theme emerges from each of the Meccan Surahs of this Surah Group. As in the other Surah Groups, various other topics are dealt with under the overall theme of the Surah Group. Similarly, Medinan Surahs in this Surah Group are treated under the general theme of the Meccan Surahs in this Surah Group. The necessary consequence of believing in the Day of Resurrection is to obey God and his Prophet. In the Medinan Surahs, the demands of such obedience to God and to his Prophet are described in accordance with the circumstances of the times (*zamana nuzul ke halat da'i hue hain*, *ibid*).

Islahi divides the Meccan from the Medinan Surahs on the basis of those who are addressed in these two groups of Surahs. In the Meccan Surahs, the main addressees are the unbelieving Quraysh and the intent is to refute their doctrines and presumptions. However, in the Medinan Surahs, the addressees are the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the Muslims. The intent of the Medinan Surahs is to point out the weaknesses of those who believed in God and in his Apostle but whose practices did not fully correspond to their faith. In this context, the People of the Book are also mentioned because they had joined forces with the Quraysh in opposing Islam (*islam ki mukhalafat*, *ibid*) and also because they provoked the hypocrites to stir up division among the Muslims.

Seventeen Surahs belong to this Surah Group – seven of them are Meccan and ten are Medinan.

The Theme of the Surahs

Surah Qaf

Surah *Qaf* is the first Surah of the Group and its main theme (*'umud*) is to provide proofs for life after death. The Qur'an was making the people aware of the fact that, after their death, they would all have to appear before their Lord to give an account of their words and deeds. The leaders of the Quraysh were irritated that a person claiming to be a prophet was preaching about life after death and they questioned the very possibility of life after death. Surah *Qaf* takes up this issue (*isteba'd ko mauzu' bahs bana kar*, *ibid*) and answers all the doubts and the questions that are related to it.

Surah Adh Dhariyat

The present Surah is one of a pair with the previous Surah, which provided an answer for those who questioned the very possibility of life after death. In the present Surah, the Qur'an takes a further step by expressing a warning about the punishment that is to come (*inzar-i-'azab ko bhi sabit kiya gaya hai aur jaza o saza ko bhi*, *ibid*, p. 575). Islahi says that verses 5-6 of the Surah are an expression of its theme (*surah ka 'umud*, *ibid*). However, Asad's translation of these verses makes no mention of the punishment mentioned by Islahi:

Verily, that which you are promised is true indeed, and, verily judgment is bound to come!

The Surah addresses the unbelievers among the Quraysh and develops its argument on the basis of evidence available in nature and in the human person (*istadlal ki bunyad tamam tar afaq o anfus ke dalail par hai*, *ibid*). Just as in the previous Surah, the Prophet (peace be upon him) is encouraged and consoled.

Surah At Tur

In the previous two Surahs of this Surah Group, arguments based on reason, nature and history were presented concerning the afterlife and concerning reward and punishment. Whereas Surah *Adh Dhariyat* had expressed both aspects of reward and punishment (*jaza o saza ke donon pahluon par hawi hai*, vol. 8, p. 11), the present Surah gives greater prominence to the aspect

of punishment (*'azab ke pahlu ko ziyadah numayan farmaya hai*, ibid). Hence, after making some observations based on history and on the world, the Surah expresses a very clear threat to the Quraysh (verses 7-8). Islahi says that this kind of threat forms the basic theme (*is surah ka 'umud*, ibid) of the Surah. But verses 7-8 are addressed to all mankind.

Surah An Najm

This Surah is the twin of the previous Surah. They both share the same basic topic, namely, proofs for the approaching reward and punishment (*markazi mazmun . . . ya'ni jaza aur saza ka isbat*, ibid, p. 45). Whereas the previous Surah stresses the aspect of punishment, the present Surah highlights the emptiness of intercessory prayer (*shafa't-i-batil ki tardid hai*, ibid) in which the Quraysh were engaged. The Surah dwells on this point because the unbelievers tried to neutralize even the most severe threat of punishment by having recourse to intercessory prayer. For this reason, the Qur'an always mentions the Last Day together with the unity of God (*qayamat aur tauhid donon ka zikr*, ibid). The present Surah brings out this point very clearly as if to say that the threat of God's punishment is unavoidable for those who reject God. The Surah tries to persuade those who were relying on intercessory prayer that those beings on which they were relying for support do not exist and that God will deal with human beings on the basis of full knowledge and perfect justice. It is impossible for anyone to add to God's knowledge or to make any changes in God's decisions or to change falsity into truth by means of intercessory prayer.

Islahi draws the attention of the reader to the harmony (*munasabat*, ibid) between the ending of the previous Surah and the opening of the present Surah, both of which refer to the stars. The words of these verses establish a subtle link between these two Surahs. Sometimes this link consists only of words and at other times can be found only in the meaning of the words. At other times, the link is both verbal and according to the meaning.

Surah Al Qamar

This Surah begins where the previous Surah left off. Islahi points to the harmony (*munasabat*, ibid, p. 87) between the Surahs created by the similarity in the ending of the previous Surah and the opening of the present one. Islahi notes a further aspect of this harmony in the fact that the previous Surah refers to the falling of the stars and the present Surah

describes how the moon is split asunder. The present Surah also repeats the following refrain in verses 17, 22, 32, and 40:

Hence, indeed, We made this Qur'an easy to bear in mind: who, then, is willing to take it to heart?

Islahi says that such a refrain has an important function. The speaker thereby draws attention to his arguments and invites hard-hearted listeners (*ziddi mukhatab*, *ibid*) to abandon their resistance and to accept the abundant evidence for faith.

The addressees were demanding a visible sign of the punishment with which the Qur'an was threatening them so they may become convinced of its veracity. The Surah asks these unbelievers why they would not prefer to learn a lesson from what happened to former nations. Instead of showing them a sign of the coming punishment, God's graciousness provided them with a revealed book that contained sound teaching and removed all their doubts.

Surah Ar Rahman

Islahi describes the background to the present Surah and the preceding one, which were revealed in Mecca (*jo makki zindagi ke is daur mein nazil hui hai*, *ibid*, p. 119). Until they were shown a sign of the punishment mentioned in the Qur'an, the Meccans were unwilling to believe that they would be punished for refusing the message of the Qur'an. They also refused to accept the coming of a Last Day on which they would have to face the reality of eternal punishment (*daimi 'azab*, *ibid*).

Just as the previous Surah used a refrain because of the hard-heartedness of the unbelievers, the present Surah makes similar use of a different refrain:

Which, then, of your Sustainer's powers can you disavow?

Islahi says that this style (*uslub*, *ibid*) is used whenever there is a need to convince listeners with persuasive language.

The refrain used in the Surah is, according to Islahi, a new way of presenting the teaching of the Qur'an (*is surah mein isi mazmun ko ek naye uslub . . . se liya hai*, *ibid*, p. 120). Without paying attention to the disposition of his listeners, the efforts of a speaker will not achieve the desired result. Those unaware of this important aspect of communication (*kalam*, *ibid*) will not recognize the beauty and subtlety of this quality of speech. Such people will attribute the constant use of a refrain to mere repetition. Islahi says that

some ignorant people have referred to the Surah in this way. However, if they knew the kind of people this Surah was addressing, they would have come to appreciate the way it uses a refrain to try to convince its listeners. Islahi says the Surah is asking the Quraysh why they are not prepared to believe until they see a visible sign of the punishment mentioned in the Qur'an.

Surah Al Waqi'ah

This is the last of the Meccan Surahs of this Surah Group and it briefly presents the whole argument about reward and punishment contained in the previous six Surahs. The topic was dealt with in these Surahs by drawing our attention to the world around us and by pointing to nature and to reason. Instead of presenting further arguments, the present Surah tells the Quraysh that the coming of the Last Day is certain and inevitable. Those of the Quraysh who remain arrogant will have to face a situation where the realities of honour and dishonour will be dealt with in a way that is very different from the way the world deals with them. Those who believe and who did good works will be honoured and will enjoy all the pleasures of paradise whereas those who were absorbed in the pleasures of this world will not be received into paradise.

Surah Al Hadid

This is the twin of the previous Surah. Since the present Surah is Medinan, it differs from the previous Surah in terms of time and place (*zamani aur makani bu'd hai*, *ibid*, p. 191). However, both Surahs have much the same meaning. The previous Surah clarified the basic principle regarding the Last Day when all people will be divided into three groups: the first group will consist of the very first believers and the second and third groups will consist of those who are welcomed and who are not welcomed into paradise.

Islahi says the Surah is addressed especially to those Muslims who took part in *jihad* and who made contributions towards the victory in Mecca. These Muslims are given a special ranking (*wo sabiqin ke zamre mein shamil honge*, *ibid*) which is higher than those who came later. Moreover, those Muslims who entered Islam but were not fully aware of its demands are encouraged to take part in *jihad* and to make their contributions (*infaq*, *ibid*). They are warned that they should not become so engrossed in the world that they may lose their zeal for the eternal kingdom (*abdi badshahi*, *ibid*).

Besides the thematic connection between the two Surahs, there is an obvious structural link between the last verse of the previous Surah and the first verse of the present one, both of which extol the name of God. Such structural links occur more than once in the Qur'an and provide the framework for its coherence (*munazzim aur marbut kitab hone ka ek wazeh qarina hai*, ibid).

Surah Al Mujadalah

As usual, Islahi stresses the context at the time of revelation, reading the whole Surah in the light of what he understands to have been the context or the social background of that period.

The previous Surah ended with an answer for the People of the Book who had raised objections concerning *jihad*. The need to deal with such objections arose because the hypocrites used these objections to spread propaganda among the Muslims to weaken their readiness to participate in *jihad*. At the time this Surah was revealed, such efforts by the hypocrites were common. The Qur'an provides guidance for the Muslims to counter these efforts.

A practical example of such guidance is found in the advice that this Surah gives to consult with the Messenger of God (*allah o rasul ke samne 'arz kare*, ibid, p. 243) whenever Muslims encounter any difficulty on account of Islam.

Finally, those people who spread propaganda against Islam based on their imaginary or real difficulties are making a direct attack on God and his Messenger (*allah o rasul ke khilaf mahaz-i-jang*, ibid) and they will be crushed. God has made an unchangeable decree (*qata'i faislah*, ibid) that final victory will belong to God and to his Messenger.

Surah Al Hashr

The previous Surah ended with the statement that whoever opposes God and his Messenger will experience defeat because victory belongs to God and to his Messengers. The present Surah illustrates this claim by relating an event that occurred during this period. By means of this event, the hypocrites could see that even those enemies they thought were invincible became so terrified that they destroyed their own homes and fled into exile without receiving help from anyone.

The whole Surah is addressed to the hypocrites (*khitab munafikin hi se hai*, ibid, p. 279) in order to make it quite clear to them that the Qur'an has answers for all their doubts and in order that they might open their hearts to the faith. If the Qur'an had been revealed on a mountain, it would have humbled itself before God. Hence, if the unbelievers do not humble themselves before God, their hearts must be harder than stone and so God is entitled to deal with them accordingly.

Surah Al Mumtahanah

At usual, Islahi describes the historical context and does not move beyond this context in his explanation of the Surah.

In the previous Surah, the hypocrites were given the command to break all relations with the People of the Book, especially with the Jews. These hypocrites were themselves also mostly People of the Book. The present Surah orders the believers to sever all relations with the unbelievers living in Mecca. The addressees are those who had entered Islam (*islam mein dakhil bhi they*, ibid, p. 319) and who had even undertaken the migration for their faith (*din ki khatir*, ibid) but who maintained their bonds with family relationships (*rishtah o baradari*, ibid). Hence, in times of crisis, these people were likely to commit a breach of loyalty.

The topic of Surah is the eradication of hypocrisy and the purification of the believers. It focuses on those Muslims who had undertaken the migration but who had not yet demonstrated its necessary consequences by leaving their past life and environment behind as Abraham did (*asl ibrahimi haqiqat*, ibid). The Surah reminds these people that if they wish to experience the blessings that Abraham received when he made his migration, they would have to sever all relations with their former way of life (*sabiq mahaul se*, ibid) and bind themselves to God and to his Messenger.

Surah As Saff

This Surah is addressed to those Muslims who had made a covenant with the Prophet but who remained reluctant to perform *jihad* in God's cause. The Surah warns those Muslims that if they persist in their ambivalent attitude, their situation will resemble that of the Jews who gradually began to disobey their own Prophet Moses even after entering into a covenant with him. The

punishment for their arrogance was that they became unable to accept the guidance of God. Even when the Prophet Jesus appeared among them with many convincing miracles and proclaimed the coming of the last Prophet (peace be upon him), these people rejected his miracles as magic and refused to believe in the message of Jesus. Islahi says that these people looked for ways to oppose Islam (*ab wo islam ki mukhalafat ke darpe hain*, ibid, p. 349).

Despite all their opposition, however, Islam achieved pre-eminence in the whole region (*is sar zamin ke tamam adyan par ghalib a ke rahega*, ibid). Islahi refers to the actual, physical victory of the Muslims in Mecca (*is fath-i-‘azim ki basharat di hai jo mustaqbil qarib mein hasil hone wali hai*, ibid) by interpreting verse 13 in this light:

And (withal, He will grant you) yet another thing that you dearly love: succour from God (in this world), and a victory soon to come: and (thereof, O Prophet,) give thou a glad tiding to all who believe.

Finally, the Surah provides examples of true virtue worthy of imitation on the part of Muslims. The Jews are not to be imitated because they broke their promises.

Surah Al Jumuah

There is no basic difference between the basic idea or theme (‘*umud*, ibid, p. 373) of Surah *As Saff* and the present Surah. However, they do differ in the style and in the way each Surah presents its argument (*uslub-i-bayan aur nahj-i-istadlal donon ke alag alag hain*, ibid). Whereas the previous Surah alluded only to the prophecy made by the Prophet Jesus about the coming of the last Prophet (peace be upon him), the present Surah refers to the prayer made in this regard by the Prophet Abraham. The Ismaelis are encouraged to recognize the great favour (‘*azim ni’mat*, ibid) that God bestowed upon them by sending the last Prophet (peace be upon him) to be among them. By becoming the victims of the Jews’ jealousy, they will deprive themselves of this great favour.

The Surah also protests the behaviour of a group of Muslims who allowed greed for worldly gain to take priority over their Friday prayer and their respect for the Prophet (peace be upon him). Such greed is an indication of their failure to appreciate the covenant they made with God – mentioned in the previous Surah. They are also reminded of the way the Jews failed to

appreciate their pact with God and were deprived of the blessings of God's law (*yahud allah ki shari'ah se mahrum ho gaye*, *ibid*). The Muslims will prosper provided they do not follow in their footsteps.

Surah Al Munafiqun

This Surah completes and perfects the previous Surah, which ended with a description of the way some people were so preoccupied with making profit that they would abandon the Friday prayers at the news of the arrival of a trading caravan. The present Surah deals with those hypocrites who did not let their faith make real demands on them but who, at the same time, wanted to win the good opinion of the Prophet by swearing an oath that Muhammad (peace be upon him) was a true Prophet.

However, God knew what was in their hearts. They showed that they were neither believers in God nor in his Messenger by their hypocritical behaviour, which consisted in trying to shelter behind their readiness to swear an oath. Although they had made the first steps towards faith, they were not able to persevere in what they had undertaken but returned to their former love of worldly life and to the enjoyment of their possessions. For this reason, they became incapable of thinking and understanding clearly.

Surah At Taghabun

The previous Surah ended with the admonition not to become so engrossed with material possessions and with one's children so as to neglect one's duty to God. Whoever does not keep in mind the final purpose for which God grants sustenance and well being in this world (*jo rizq o fazl us ne bakhsha hai is mein akhirat ke liye kamai kar lo*, *ibid*, p. 409) will experience intense regret at the moment of death and feel a yearning to be given a further opportunity (*muhlat*, *ibid*) in order to reform his life. However, time lost cannot be regained and regret for lost opportunities will not yield a fresh start.

The present Surah deals with this topic (*is surah mein isi mazmun ko 'umud ki haisiyat se liya hai*, *ibid*). The Surah states that fulfillment comes only with the Last Day when it becomes clear whether or not one has made a success of life. Whoever wishes to win the great victory (*fauz-i-'azim*, *ibid*) must be ready to make sacrifices in the way of God and his Messenger and to remain free of reproach. It is noteworthy that Islahi does not interpret the

reference to victory in this Surah in the physical way of victory in Mecca as he did in verse 13 of Surah *As Saff*.

Furthermore, it is possible that a person's wife or children become a hindrance in the effort to achieve the true purpose of life. Many people lose a sense of direction by becoming preoccupied with such matters. Hence, a person who wishes to maintain his faith needs to free himself from all obstacles even including, if need be, his own wife and children. However, he must always remain well inclined towards them and remain understanding with regard to their situation (*agarche in ke sath 'afu o darguzar ka ma'amlah rakhe*, *ibid*). By using the word "man" or "husband" instead of "partner", Islahi sees this situation in a male-oriented way.

Surah At Talaq

The previous Surah referred to the possibility of one's spouse and children becoming one's enemies because of temptations that may arise through them (cf. verses 14-16). The present Surah does not suggest that one breaks all ties with them but that one takes precautions to protect oneself from harm.

The two Surahs *At Talaq* and *At Tahrīm* provide further clarification about this issue, presenting a balanced way of expressing both love and rejection. According to Surah *At Talaq*, when difficulties arise in the relationship with one's spouse one must pay heed to the laws that God has laid down. Surah *At Tahrīm* presents the law of God in a situation where there is love and harmony between the spouses. It is clear that a good relationship between the spouses is the basis of all societies and every person will have to deal with this fact. However, not everyone is aware of the subtle requirements involved in this relationship; nor is everyone able to negotiate the crises (*nafrat ya muhabat ki halchal mein*, *ibid*, p. 429) that occur in the experience of love and hatred. For some reason, when differences and quarrels occur, many people take the way of hatred and hostility and completely neglect the demands of God's law. On the other hand, when a relationship is founded on love, as it should be, respect for the laws of God can sometimes be sacrificed in favour of the expression of love. Both these ways of behaving are a transgression of God's law and result in failure on the Last Day.

For this reason, these two Surahs say that a person should not be insensitive but should behave according to the laws of God. In this way, both these Surahs are a brief recapitulation of Surah *At Taghabun*. The fact that both

these Surahs address the Prophet (peace be upon him) and that neither begins with an introduction are indications (*is bat ka qarina hai*, ibid) that the function of these Surahs is to complete and perfect Surah *At Taghabun*. Moreover, the Prophet is addressed, not as an individual but as the representative of the community (*balke ummat ke wakil ki haisiyat se*, ibid).

The rules for the reform of society were made directly to the Prophet (peace be upon him) in this Surah so that people would realize the importance and the need for reform. Islahi says that the reforms advocated by these Surahs were aimed at issues common in pre-Islamic society but he finds the same issues present in our own culture and civilization.

Surah At Tahrīm

The previous Surah provided guidance about how to observe the laws of God in times of hatred. The present Surah is concerned with maintaining the laws of God in times of love because human beings sometimes fail to obey the laws of God in times of love and harmony. When a person notices that his spouse or children have strayed from the law of God (*shari'ah se hata hua hai*, ibid, p. 451), he can opt to pay no attention and hope that those concerned will gradually change their ways. Islahi says that, in this way, it often happens that people do not try to prevent the misdeeds of their relatives. In fact, they even attempt to hide their misdeeds from public scrutiny by making various excuses. One finds this kind of behaviour not only among ordinary people but also among those who are intent on reforming the lives of others. The reason for this state of affairs is that these people prefer to abandon their relatives to the wrath of God (*khuda ke ghazab ke hawalah kiya jaye*, ibid) rather than trying to rescue them if this involves having to adopt means that may result in some unpleasantness in their relationship. People who overlook the faults (*khilaf-i-shari'ah baton se chashm pushi karta hai*, ibid) of their spouses, children or friends are not in fact showing them genuine love but, on the contrary, treating them in a very unfriendly manner without even being aware of it.

Conclusions

In Surah Group Six, Islahi continues his approach of trying to find a word, a phrase or an idea that could act as a link between consecutive Surahs. On the basis of such links, Islahi tries to establish that certain Surahs form a pair. However, the meaning of the linking words and the linking ideas themselves are the result of Islahi's own perception of the theme ('*umud*') of the whole Surah Group. In other words, any reader can say that the Qur'an is coherent after he or she has understood the Surahs in a certain way.

Islahi also continues to assert that particular verses of the Surahs are addressed to the Quraysh. However, they should be given a more universal meaning. For instance, verses 7-8 of Surah *At Tur* are addressed to mankind in general but Islahi says they express a threat to the Quraysh. Similarly, Islahi says that Surah *Ar Rahman* is addressed to the unbelieving Meccans whereas it is more universal in scope

Islahi articulates the theme ('*umud*') of the Day of Resurrection (*jami' 'umud ba's o hashr o nashr hai*, vol. 7, p. 527) that many of the Surahs of this Surah Group have in common. He does this by highlighting one aspect of a Surah and disregarding several others. For instance, Islahi focuses on the reference to wives and children in Surah *At Taghabun* and Surah *At Talaq*. Although both these Surahs and others in Surah Group Six speak of social justice, Islahi downplays the verses about social justice in order to ensure that one common theme emerges for all the Surahs of this Surah Group.

Islahi gives great emphasis to the fact that God will reward the virtuous and punish the evildoers (*jaza o saza*) on the Last Day. Islahi never alludes to the obvious problem of anthropomorphism in describing God as handing out rewards and punishments. Nor does he investigate the deeper meaning of this concept in the Qur'an but remains content with the traditional meaning it has been given. It seems to me that the image of a punishing God needs to be reconciled with the great emphasis on God's mercy and compassion in the Qur'an. Islahi does not provide an understanding of punishment that would see it as the consequences of man's own actions in the world rather than as the action of an avenging God.

Moreover, I find Islahi's repeated proclamation throughout his commentary that accountability on the Last Day is demanded for the sake of justice to be another anthropomorphic way of trying to understand the unfathomable

ways of God. Moreover, his argument is tainted by the kind of rationalism that may have been persuasive at the time but which is no longer acceptable today. This way of thinking seems to imply that a virtuous person could find consolation in the knowledge that a wicked person will get what he deserves on the Last Day. Islahi's frequent use of the term "the way of God" (*sunnat-i-ilahi*) to explain that justice will be done on the Last Day by rewarding the good and punishing the wicked confirms my impression that Islahi is imposing his very limited human understanding on God's wisdom.

3. Surah Group Seven

Introduction

This is the first Surah of the seventh and last Surah Group. The order of the Surahs is the same as we have observed in previous Surah Groups in which several Medinan Surahs follow a series of Meccan Surahs. The Medinan Surahs are connected with the Meccan Surahs as branches are joined to a tree. Sometimes a Surah contains both Meccan and Medinan parts within it but it is not always easy to determine where the Meccan part of a Surah ends and where the Medinan part begins. According to Islahi, the first 43 Surahs of this Surah Group are Meccan and the last five Surahs are Medinan.

Just as we found in all the previous Surah Groups, this Surah Group deals with every aspect of the basic principles of the call to faith (*da'wat*, vol. 8, p. 479). However, the basic topic of this Surah Group is that of warning (*is pure grup ka asal mazmun inzar hai*, *ibid*) and most of the Surahs in this Group were revealed in the initial stage of the Meccan period. The warning contained in this Surah Group is presented just as the Prophet (peace be upon him) first heard it in the cave of *Hira*.

The nature of this warning is such that all issues connected with the Last Day are described in full (*akhwal-i-qayamat ki bhi puri taswir hai*, *ibid*) and the punishment of the Last Day is described as if the Quraysh were actually engaged in presenting the objections they had against the message of the Qur'an.

The way of presenting the argument in this Surah Group makes use of the signs in the heavens and draws on the evidence of history and of human nature (*istadlal mein beshtar afaq ke mushahadat, tarikh ke musallamat aur anfus ke bayyinat se kam liya gaya hai*, *ibid*). The effect of these Surahs in the whole of Arabia was such that no one could remain indifferent to them but had either to oppose or to support their message. The struggle that took place as a result of these two conflicting responses led to the victory of truth, which the final Surahs of every Surah Group refer to.

Finally, Islahi discusses the division of the Qur'an into seven Surah Groups in the light of verse 87 of Surah *Al Hijr*. Mir has discussed this aspect of

Islahi's commentary at some length in his study of the concept of *nazm*.²⁰⁹ Islahi also divides the Qur'an into seven distinct styles (*quran sat uslubon ya 'ibaron mein nazil hua hai aur is se isharah unhi sat grupon ki taraf hoga*, *ibid*, p. 481)

²⁰⁹ Cf. Mir (1983), pp. 140-165. Mir also mentions that most scholars consider verse 87 of Surah *Al Hijr* as referring to the seven verses of Surah *Al Fatihah*.

The Themes of the Surahs

Surah Al Mulk

The theme of this Surah is that of warning about certain punishment in this world and in the next (*is surah ka 'umud inzar hai aur is inzar mein donon hi 'azab shamil hain*, ibid, p. 481). The argument of the Surah (*istadlal*, ibid) is based on the signs visible in nature. According to this argument, the signs in nature point to certain qualities possessed by the Creator. Reflecting on these signs, one can conclude that a Last Day will come on which those people who lived their lives without paying attention to the Creator will perish in hell. However, those people who followed the dictates of common sense (*apni 'aql o fahm se kam liya*, ibid) and lived their lives in awe of God will be rewarded.

Surah Al Qalam

Since this Surah forms a pair with the preceding Surah, the basic theme and topic of both these Surahs does not differ very much (*koi usuli farq nahin hai*, ibid, p. 505). The difference lies only in the style and the way of presenting the argument (*tarz-i-bayan, nahj istadlal aur lab o lahja mein farq hai*, ibid). Just as the previous Surah warned the Quraysh of inevitable punishment on the Last Day, this Surah presents the same warning. The only difference is that the present Surah presents this message in a more vivid way. The present Surah states that it will very soon become evident who is ultimately in control of the misguided leaders of the people.

Next, the Quraysh are warned by means of the parable of the garden not to consider their present life of ease to be indestructible.²¹⁰ The same God who has provided them with all these good things also has the power to take them away again.

Finally, those who deny the resurrection (*mukazzibin-i-qayamat*, ibid) are told that their way of thinking is wrong and that it is not possible for God to treat the good and the bad alike. They are challenged to produce some guarantee that their alternative claims will prevail. The Prophet (peace be

²¹⁰ It is difficult to understand the parable of the garden as being directed to the Quraysh because there were no gardens in the dry, rocky environment of Mecca.

upon him) is encouraged to wait patiently for the outcome of the decree to be made by the Sustainer of the world. He is advised not to be like the Prophet Jonah.

Surah Al Haqqah

Reflection on the present Surah and on the one that came immediately before it will lead to the conclusion that both these Surahs share many points in common. For example:

1. Both Surahs give a vivid presentation of the Last Day and of its awesomeness.
2. Both Surahs treat of the righteous and of the unrighteous.
3. Both Surahs attest to the authenticity of the Qur'an.

The present Surah has a strong connection with the previous Surah (*bari gahri munasabat hai*, *ibid*, p. 535). The basic theme is the same, namely, presentation of the evidence for the punishment that will be inflicted on the Last Day (*is ka 'umud . . . isbat-i-'azab o qayamat*, *ibid*), though the style of presenting the argument is different in each Surah. The present Surah refers to the authenticity of the Qur'an and mentions the consequences of rejecting its message. Both the present Surah and the previous one discuss this topic (*yahi mazmun zer-i-bahas aya hai*, *ibid*), though the previous Surah deals with it in the introduction while the present Surah raises it at the end. Each way of presenting the material makes its own contribution towards conveying the teaching of the Qur'an.

Surah Al Ma'arij

Since this Surah is the second of a pair with the previous Surah, there is no basic difference in the basic theme of the two Surahs (*koi usuli farq nahin hai*, *ibid*, p. 559). Both present a warning about the punishment that will be imposed on the Last Day. Even the styles (*zahiri uslub*, *ibid*) of both these Surahs have much in common since the warning about reward and punishment is placed in the middle of the Surah in each case. A special aspect of the present Surah is the warning given to those who deny religion (*mutamarriddin*, *ibid*) and who make fun of the Last Day by demanding that it should appear more quickly. The Prophet (peace be upon him) is urged to be patient with such narrow-minded people. Although God is giving these people more time to go about their ways (*is waqt khuda ne in ko jo dhil di hai*, *ibid*), they are not being realistic and will lose their apparent composure

at the first signs of disaster. The Prophet (peace be upon him) is told to leave them alone until the time comes for a final decision about these people. When that moment finally does come, they will be able to gauge for themselves how terrible the Last Day, which they were saying should come soon, actually turned out to be.

Surah Nuh

The previous Surah provides some response for those who were demanding that the Last Day come quickly. The previous Surah also urges the Prophet (peace be upon him) to have patience.

The present Surah narrates the different stages in the life of the Prophet Noah and describes the patience he showed as he waited for the expected punishment to come down upon the people. The purpose of this brief but complete narrative is to provide the last Prophet (peace be upon him) and his followers with an image by which they could see for themselves the extent of the patience that God's Messenger has to endure before reaching his ultimate goal.

The narrative of the Prophet Noah provides the followers of the last Prophet (peace be upon him) with an illustration of how those making fun of the delay of the punishment were left to live until the time came for God to seize them. Once God intervened in their lives, however, no one could come to their assistance any longer.

Surah Al Jinn

Since this Surah is the second of a pair with the previous Surah, there is no basic difference in the themes of the two Surahs. The previous Surah addressed the leaders of the Quraysh and told them about the way the stubborn leaders of the people living at the time of the Prophet Noah rejected the message given to them. It also described what happened to them as a result of their stubbornness.

The present Surah describes how these same leaders of the Quraysh blocked their ears as a sign of their rejection of the message of the Qur'an. In contrast, the *jinn* or invisible beings were so struck by the message that they immediately arranged to make it heard more widely. Earlier, in verses 29-32 of Surah *Ahkaf*, we heard that a reference to the *jinn* embarrassed the

Quraysh because these verses state that the *jinn* decided to act on the message they heard while the Quraysh disregarded it completely. In fact, the Quraysh openly opposed it.

Another purpose of the Surah is to encourage the Prophet (peace be upon him) not to pay too much attention to the negative attitude of the Quraysh because they have become incapable of receiving the message of the Qur'an, despite all the Prophet's efforts. Those whose hearts are receptive will benefit from the message – whether they are directly addressed by it or not and even when no special provisions have been made to preach the message to them.

The present Surah describes how the *jinn* were affected by the message of the Qur'an. However, this may not impress those people who are enslaved to their feelings and who simply disregard anything that does not accord with their own feelings. The Quraysh were not the kind of people who only believed what they could touch with their hands or see with their eyes. Not only did the Quraysh believe in the existence of the *jinn* but they even fostered contact with them through an elaborate system of mediums (*kahanat ka pura nazam qaim kar rakha tha*, *ibid*, p. 610). Since the Quraysh were ready to listen to false messages from the *jinn* relayed to them through their mediums (*kahinon ke waste se*, *ibid*), the Qur'an describes how the *jinn* responded to the true message of the Qur'an – hoping that the Quraysh might take note.

Those among the Quraysh who were prepared to distinguish between truth and falsity would be guided by the message of the Qur'an. Since the Qur'an refers to the truth contained in the unseen world, a person genuinely seeking after truth would benefit from the message of the Qur'an. People who slavishly follow their own feelings would consider the message to be a figment of their imagination.

Surah Al Muzzammil and Surah Al Muddaththir

Islahi says these two Surahs are of the same kind. By reflecting on their meaning (*mutalib par ghaur karne se*, vol. 9, p. 17), one can conclude that these two Surahs were revealed at the time when opposition from the Quraysh caused great difficulties for the Prophet (peace be upon him). Islahi understands the title of the Surah to be a symbolic reference to the way the Prophet was wrapped in his own thoughts and concerns for the plight of the

people. The cloak was a symbol of the responsibility the Prophet felt (*zimmadariyon ke ma'amle mein nihayat hassas hote they*, *ibid*) and his cloak provided him with some solace. The form of address used in the Surah is an endearing one (*ye nihayat piyar ka khitab hai*, *ibid*) and the Surah encourages the Prophet and provides him with the strength he needs for his task.

Surah Qayamah

Islahi summarizes the last part of the previous Surah and proceeds to show that the present Surah picks up the same theme. He does this by comparing the function of the self-reproaching spirit mentioned in verse 2 (*naafs-i-lawwama*, *ibid*, p. 71) with the day of accountability (*'alam-i-akbar ke andar bhi ek naafs-i-lawwama hai jis ke qayamat kahte hain*, *ibid*). Islahi makes disparaging remarks about modern philosophy (*jadid falsafah*, *ibid*, p. 72), saying that it cannot describe the origins of conscience (*zamir*, *ibid*). Instead, the Surah proclaims that, since human beings know right from wrong, they will be held accountable on the Last Day (*jis mein is puri dunya ka muhasaba ho*, *ibid*).

Surah Ad Dahr

This Surah is the twin of the previous Surah *Qayamah*. The present Surah begins where the previous Surah left off. Specifically, the last four verses of the previous Surah and the first three verses of the present Surah express a thematic connection between the two Surahs (*halqa ittisal*, *ibid*, p. 99). According to Islahi, this is a common feature for Surahs that are paired. Moreover, both Surahs have the same theme (*donon ka 'umud bilkul ek hi hai*, *ibid*) but are different in their style. By referring to the style, Islahi means that the words used in the two Surahs are different. As usual, Islahi argues for the necessity of a final Day of Accountability on the basis of his rational way of thinking according to which it would be logically impossible to deny the coming of the Last Day (*cf. ibid*).

Surah Al Mursalat

This Surah resembles Surah *Adh Dhariyat* in its theme (*'umud*) and in the argument it presents (*tarz-i-istadlal*, *ibid*, p. 123). However, it resembles Surah *Ar Rahman* in its style and approach (*uslub-i-bayan aur mazaj mein*, *ibid*). Both Surah *Adh Dhariyat* and the present Surah refer to the force of

the winds to make their argument about the Last Day. Both Surah *Ar Rahman* and the present Surah make use of a refrain to present their argument. The present Surah repeats the refrain, mentioned in verse 15, ten times:

Woe on that Day unto those who give the lie to the truth.

Islahi repeats what he said about the use of the refrain in Surah *Ar Rahman*. When such a refrain is used, the addressees are usually stubborn people (*khitab . . . zidi aur hat dharmi logon se hai*, *ibid*). One need to understand the purpose of this particular use of the refrain in order to appreciate its effectiveness. The refrain is a form of expression (*balaghat-i-kalam*, *ibid*) by which the Surah communicates its message and is not simply an exercise in repetition.

The main argument in the present Surah is the evidence of the natural environment (*afaq ke asar o shawahid se hai*, *ibid*). Whereas arguments based on the nature of the human person (*anfusi dalil*, *ibid*) made up the main argument in the previous Surah, these are marginal in this Surah. The arguments used by these two Surahs are thus quite different (*goya nau'yat istadlal donon mein alag alag hai*, *ibid*). However, the two Surahs do not differ in their theme (*mauzu' ke 'itibar se*, *ibid*). Finally, it is clear that the previous Surah proclaimed good news whereas the present Surah is a warning (*sabiq mein basharat ka pahlu numayan hai aur is mein inzar ka*, *ibid*).

Surah An Naba

This is one of pair with the former Surah *Al Mursalat* so there is no basic difference in the theme of both these Surahs. The former Surah argued that the consequence of this world having a purpose is that it will one day come to an end. On the Last Day, the virtuous will be rewarded and the evildoers will be punished. Similarly, in this Surah, those who rebelled against God will be punished and those who believed will be rewarded (*an'am payenge*, *ibid*, p. 151). The Surah makes its argument by drawing on the abundant evidence of God's handiwork (*khuda ki rububiyat*, *ibid*) in the heavens and on the earth.

The tone (*lab o lahja*, *ibid*) of the Surah is the same as that of the previous one. The Surah opens with the kind of question commonly asked by those who refuse to believe. The argument is constructed systematically by using reproaches, appeals and threats. The reward promised to the believers is

presented in contrast to the destiny of those who do evil (*anjam-i-bad ka muazana*, *ibid*).

Surah An Naziat

This Surah is a warning to those among the Quraysh who were denying the message of the Qur'an. These people considered punishment on the Last Day to be an empty threat far beyond what they could imagine. The Surah points to the evidence of nature to convince them that they cannot escape the demands of God. The heavenly bodies demonstrate the power of God and will uproot them completely. The Surah tells them that they have only a limited time left in this world (*muhlat*, *ibid*, p. 169).

The meaning of the Surah (*matalib ke 'itibar se*, *ibid*) resembles that of Surah *Adh Dhariyat* and Surah *Al Mursalat*. Islahi says that the signs in nature point clearly (*nihayat wazeh dalil hai*, *ibid*) to the coming of the Day of Accountability.

Surah 'Abasa

This Surah is one of a pair with the previous Surah so there is no basic difference in their theme. Even the style and the presentation of the argument (*uslub-i-bayan aur mauad-i-istadlal*, *ibid*, p. 191) are very similar in both Surahs. The only thing that can differentiate this Surah from the previous one is the special beauty of the arrangement (*matablib ki tartib mein . . . ek naya husn*, *ibid*). Furthermore, Islahi finds a thematic and structural link between verse 45 of the previous Surah:

Thou art but (sent) to warn those who stand in awe of it
and the opening scene in verse 5 of the present Surah, which describes people who are "self sufficient". He also refers to another part of the Qur'an where the Prophet's opponents demand that he sever his links with the poor. The Surah sternly reproaches people who think like this (*mutamarriiddin*, *ibid*) among the Quraysh (*quarysh ke far'anah hi ki taraf hai*, *ibid*).

Surah At Takwir

References to the awesome Day of Accountability that were made in the preceding Surahs – *An Naziat* and *'Abasa* – are brought together in the present Surah. Signs in the heavens and on earth and signs within the human person are portrayed in this Surah in such a way that any thinking person

would recognize them as an indication of what is still shrouded in mystery (*jo abhi pas-i-pardah hai*, *ibid*, p. 215) but which will one day be exposed.

Next, the scoffers among the Quraysh are told to take seriously the message of the Qur'an about the coming of the Last Day. If they dismiss the Word of God as the empty stories of soothsayers and poets, they will bring distress on none other than themselves. The Prophet's responsibility is only to warn. Thereafter it is up to the listeners to respond. It is the unalterable way of God (*sunnat*, *ibid*) that only those who respect the truth will be open to receive it.

Surah Al Infitar

This is the second of a pair with the previous Surah. Hence, these two Surahs resemble each other in their meaning and in their style (*uslub o ma'ni mein*, *ibid*, p. 235). Just as the previous Surah began by describing the portents in the sky and on the earth that all point to the Day of Judgment, this Surah begins in a similar way. Both Surahs even use the same kinds of words. Islahi compares verse 14 of the previous Surah and verse 5 of the present Surah and concludes that these verses have the same message (*thik isi mahal mein*, *ibid*). He concludes to a thematic link between these Surahs.

Islahi sticks to a rather literal interpretation of the language by saying that anyone who wishes to experience the events of that Last Day will experience them in the way described in these Surahs (*wo in suraton mein dekhe*, *ibid*). The addressees are the people who rejected the message of the Qur'an (*khitab wo 'aghiya o mustakbarin hain*, *ibid*).

Islahi says that the two Surahs differ in their argument (*istadlal*, *ibid*). The argument of the previous Surah is to affirm the authenticity of the Qur'an (*quran ki sadaqat*, *ibid*) whereas the argument of the present Surah refers to the qualities of power, wisdom, justice and compassion belonging to the Creator. In other words, the signs evident in the life of a human being all indicate the necessity of a final day of accountability (*roz-i-jaza o saza*, *ibid*). Islahi refers again to the special opportunity for reform given to humanity (*muhlat*, *ibid*, p. 236), which leaves human beings with no excuse on the Last Day.

Surah Al Mutataffin

This is the complement of the previous Surah (*sabiq surah . . . ka takmilah o tamtimmah hai*, *ibid*, p. 249) so they both have the same theme ('*umud*). The difference lies in the presentation of the argument (*istadlal . . . alag alag hai*, *ibid*). The previous Surah referred to the qualities of the Creator that exist within the human person. However, the present Surah refers to the qualities of human nature (*fitrat*, *ibid*) itself.

Islahi explains the opening verses in terms of a discussion on the nature of humanity (*insan ki fitrat*, *ibid*). He presents the problem as to why human beings do evil when their nature prompts them to do good (*apni fitrat ke khilaf*, *ibid*). Islahi uses the concept of nature (*fitrat*) to argue that, since it is in man's nature to prefer the good, God will reward those who follow their natural dictates (*jo apni fitrat ke is nur ki qadar karen*, *ibid*) and punish those who act against their own nature. Islahi says the Qur'an uses this argument again and again to explain the necessity for a Last Day of judgment.

Surah Al Inshiqaq

There is a close thematic affinity (*ma'nwi mushabihat*, *ibid*, p. 267) between the present Surah and the previous one. These Surahs offer a warning to those who reject the reality of reward and punishment. Both Surahs relate how God will separate people into groups according to their faith and their behaviour. Islahi refers constantly to the everlasting prosperity (*abdi kamyabi*, *ibid*) that the virtuous will enjoy and the humiliation (*abdi zillat*, *ibid*) that the evildoers will have to endure. However, Islahi does not allude to the close affinity of these Surahs with the theme ('*umud*) of Surah Group Three.

Islahi says that the addressees of the Surah are those who rejected the coming of the Last Day. These people said that if there were to be a Last Day, they would enjoy the same kinds of things that they were enjoying now. The Surah tells them that human nature is not without a sense of justice (*fitrat 'adl ke sha'ur se 'ari nahin hai*, *ibid*). Hence, a Last Day must come to pronounce judgment between what is good and what is bad. On that Day, those who lived their lives unmindful of this evident truth will be punished.

The argument of the previous Surah was based on human nature (*insani fitrat*, *ibid*) but the present Surah bases its argument on the portents that appear in the heavens (*afaq ke ba'z shawahid*, *ibid*).

Surah Al Buruj

Islahi describes the social situation into which this Surah was revealed (*is daur mein nazil hui*, *ibid*, p. 283). The addressees are the Quraysh who were oppressing the Muslims. The Surah refers to the punishment that God has in store for evildoers (*khuda ki aisi sakht pakr mein a jayenge*, *ibid*).

Surah At Tariq

This Surah is one of a pair with the previous Surah so there is no difference in theme between these two Surahs (*donon ka 'umud bilkul ek hai*, *ibid*, p. 297). However, they differ in their styles (*uslub-i-bayan . . . alag alag hai*, *ibid*). Islahi finds a structural and thematic link between these two Surahs by noting the resemblance of the way they open and close (*tamhid aur khatamah ke pahlu se*, *ibid*).

According to Islahi, the present Surah gives the same emphasis to punishment (*roz-i-jaza o saza*, *ibid*). The delay in the coming of the Day of Accountability provides an opportunity for reform. The concept of the completion of revelation (*hujjat tamam*, *ibid*) is also used by Islahi to explain the delay in the coming of the Last Day.

Surah Al A'la

Islahi finds a connection between this Surah and the final verses of the previous Surah, which encouraged the Prophet (peace be upon him) to endure a little while longer, for time is running out for his enemies (*thauri si muhlat*, *ibid*, p. 309). Though the present Surah is addressed to the Prophet, it points to the Quraysh (*quraysh ke hat dharmon se sarf-i-nazr kar ke*, *ibid*) and informs the Prophet about the wisdom of God in dealing with such stubborn people. The Surah consoles the Prophet by telling him that all his present hardships will soon be over (*sari rakawaten dur ho jayengi*, *ibid*). Islahi says that this way of speaking directly to the Prophet while speaking indirectly to the Prophet's opponents (*khitab ki ye tabdili*, *ibid*) will occur in the next ten Surahs. All these Surahs tell the Prophet (peace be upon him) in different ways (*mukhtalif uslubon se*, *ibid*) that his trials will soon be over.

Surah Al Ghashiyah

This Surah is the twin of the previous Surah and both these Surahs have a similar theme (*'umud mein koi usuli farq nahin hai*, ibid, p. 325). Islahi finds a connection between the two Surahs in that they both console the Prophet (*ap ko tasalli di gayi hai*, ibid). However, the way that the Surah makes its address (*andaz-i-khitab*, ibid), and the way of presenting the argument (*tariq-i-istadlal*, ibid) differ in each Surah. Besides, the present Surah explains in further detail what the former Surah had simply mentioned (*tafsil o ajmal ke pahlui se*, ibid). For example, verse 9 of Surah Al A'la consoles the Prophet:

Remind, then, (others of the truth, regardless of) whether this reminding (would seem to) be of use (or not).

The present Surah develops this point further in verses 21-22:

And so (O Prophet,) exhort them; thy task is only to exhort: thou canst not compel them (to believe).

Surah Al Fajr

Islahi says that this Surah and the previous one are thematically connected because both these Surahs argue that every reasonable person will accept the coming of the Last Day (*kisi 'aql ke liye inkar ki gunjaish nahin hai*, ibid, p. 341). In both these Surahs, the absence of a Day of Accountability would negate God's justice, mercy, power and wisdom (*us ki rahmat o rabubiyyat ke bhi munafi hai aur us ki qudrat o hikmat ke bhi*, ibid). Moreover, this Surah also consoles the Prophet (*tasalli di hai*, ibid) by explaining to him the limits of his responsibility.

Islahi mentions the test (*imtehan*, ibid) through which every person must pass and on the basis on which he will be judged on the Last Day. However, he neglects to consider this test in terms of the justice issues raised in verses 17-19:

By nay, nay, (O men, consider all that you do and fail to do): you are not generous towards the orphan, and you do not urge one another to feed the needy, and you devour the inheritance (of others) with devouring greed, and you love wealth with boundless love!

Surah Al Balad

Since this Surah is the twin of the previous Surah, there is no basic difference in their theme (*donon ke 'umud mein koi bunyadi farq nahin hai*, ibid, p. 365). The previous Surah explained that the trials of life were a test of man's readiness to give thanks to God (*shukr ya sabr ka imtehan*, ibid) and provided a way for a person to find peace (*nafs-i-mutamainnah*, ibid) in the midst of difficulties. The connection with the present Surah consists in the warning given to the Quraysh that this land in which they live was made prosperous and secure in answer to the prayer of the Prophet Abraham (*sar zamin-i-makka*, ibid). As the first two verses of the present Surah say:

Nay! I call to witness this land – this land in which thou art free to dwell.

As a result of this prosperity and security, the Quraysh became the leaders of the entire region (*us pure mulk par us ko siyadat o qiyadat hasil hui*, ibid). However, the Quraysh now understand their position as a right they inherited. They spend their wealth on useless luxuries and disregard the needs of the poor. Islahi says that this Surah is an appeal to humanity in general (*appeal hai wo bhi tamam tar insanyat . . . par mabni hai*, ibid, p. 366).

Surah Ash Shams

The previous Surah told the leaders of the Quraysh that the prosperity and security they experienced in Mecca was the result of the Prophet Abraham's prayer and that they should respect the House of God and stop spreading corruption on the earth. The present Surah describes the consequences of their corrupt ways (*is surah mein in ko taghyan o sar kashi ke anjam se daraya hai*, ibid, p. 381). The Surah tells them that God will not tolerate those who spread corruption (*allah ta'ala ki sunnat ye hai ke wo apni dunya mein taghyan o fasad ko pasind nahin karta*, ibid). The Quraysh are reminded that the corruption perpetrated by the tribe of *Thamud* is described in the literature of the Arabs. Islahi says that whole Surah should be read in this light (*is roshni mein*, ibid, p. 382).

Surah Al Layl

This Surah is one of a pair with the previous Surah and so there is no substantial difference in theme. In fact, no one could fail to miss the internal

and external resemblance (*mushabahat o mumasalat*, ibid, p. 397) between them. The previous Surah referred to the human person in the following words:

To a happy state shall indeed attain he who causes this (self) to grow in purity, and truly lost is he who buries it (in darkness).

Islahi says that the present Surah explains both what it is that makes a person impure and what method will bring about his purification (*ye pakizgi is ko kis tarah hasil hoti hai*, (ibid) in verses 17-21:

For, distant from it shall remain he who is truly conscious of God: he that spends his possessions (on others) so that he might grow in purity – not as payment for favours received, but only out of a longing for the countenance of his Sustainer, the All-Highest: and such, indeed, shall in time be well-pleased.

Surah Ad Duha

This Surah and the following Surah *Ash Sharh* form a pair (*tawam ki haisiyat rakhti hain*, ibid, p. 409). Both these Surahs console and encourage the Prophet (peace be upon him) with assurances that he will succeed in the mission he received from God. These two Surahs deal with other matters as well but their main topic is that of consolation. (*in donon ka khas mazmun hi yahi hai*, ibid). The present Surah exposes the extreme opposition that the message of the Qur'an provoked (*da'wat ki mukhalafat itni shudat ikhtiyar kar gayi hai*, ibid). Reflecting on the text of these Surahs will reveal the circumstances of the period (*is par ghaur kijiye to ma'lum hota hai . . . ke makki zindagi ke is daur mein nazil hui*, ibid). The text does not, however, provide the kind of certainty about the background of the Surah that Islahi seems to derive from it.

Surah Ash Sharh

This Surah is one of a pair with the previous Surah. Islahi says the topic raised in verse 6 of Surah *Ad Dhuha*:

Has He not found thee an orphan, and given thee shelter?
as well as subsequent verses of the previous Surah is taken up in the first verses of the present Surah (*isi ke is mein takmil kar di gayi hai*, ibid, p. 423):

Have We not opened up thy heart, and lifted from thee the burden that had weighed so heavily on thy back?

However, Islahi notices a difference between the Surahs in that the previous Surah refers to the help God provided for the Prophet (peace be upon him) at the beginning of his mission (*ba'sat se qabl ya ibtida-i-bi'sat ke daur se hai*, ibid) whereas the present Surah refers to the divine assistance the Prophet received during his expeditions beyond Mecca (*makka se nikl kar 'arb ke dusre goshon mein bhi pahunch cuka hai*, ibid).

Islahi says that the previous Surah promised the Prophet (peace be upon him) that the future of his mission (*da'wat*, ibid) would be easier than his past or present experience. The difficulties come as part of a natural development (*qanun-i-qudrat ke mutabiq ap ki tarbiyat ke liye*, ibid). The present Surah assures the Prophet (peace be upon him) that the difficulties he will experience in his mission will gradually lead to victory, provided he remain steadfast.

Surah At Tin

This Surah has as its theme to provide evidence for the reward and punishment (*is surah ka 'umud jaza o saza ka isbat hai*, ibid, p. 433). The way of God (*sunnat*, ibid) is to reward those who lead a life of faith and to punish those who follow their own desires (*nafs parasti*, ibid). According to Islahi, two of the preceding Surahs also expressed the same theme. Islahi refers to verses 5-7 of Surah *Al Layl* and verse 5 of Surah *Ash Sharh*.

Islahi also stresses that God deals with human beings in perfect justice (*bilkul haq o 'adl*, ibid) and argues that this is a matter of logical necessity (*lazmi hai*, ibid). Islahi asserts that it will be easy to determine the orientation of the present Surah by comparing it with Surah *Al Asr* (*is surah ke rukh ko ma'yyan karne mein asani hogi*, ibid).

Surah Al 'Alaq

This Surah is the twin of the previous Surah so there is no substantial difference in theme. The previous Surah provided arguments drawn from history and from the nobility of human nature (*tarikhi shawahid aur fitrat-i-insani ki a'ala sakht se*, ibid, p. 449) in order to demonstrate that they are responsible for not following the path that lies open before them (*wo khud hi zimmadar hote hain*, ibid).

In this light of this theme, it is clear that the Surah is meant to be a warning for the leaders of the Quraysh (*quraysh aur un ke lidaron ko tanbih*, ibid). These leaders would not even allow the believers to perform their prayers without being disturbed. Islahi bases his description of this state of affairs on verses 9-10:

Hast thou ever considered him who tries to prevent a servant (of God) from praying? Hast thou considered whether he is on the right way, or is concerned with God-consciousness?

By trying to determine the specific addressees of these verses from the text, however, Islahi has presumed that the text does not have a more universal meaning.

Surah Al Qadr

The former Surah relates how God, in his great concern for all creation, bestowed the Qur'an and arranged for its preservation so that it would be provide guidance for everyone. The topic of the present Surah is the revelation of the Qur'an (*is surah ka mauzu' hi nazil-i-quran hai*, ibid, p. 463). The Surah describes the splendour of that night on which the Qur'an was revealed. Islahi thus sees the present Surah as a continuation of the former Surah, which highlighted the guidance provided by the Qur'an.

Surah Al Bayyinah

This Surah is one of a pair with the former Surah. Both Surahs describe the greatness of the Qur'an (*is mein quran ki 'azmat bayan hui hai*, ibid, p. 473). The present Surah also relates how the People of the Book colluded with the unbelievers to oppose the message of the Qur'an. Their motive was simply pride. Even if they were shown a miracle, they would not believe. Islahi draws these conclusions from verse 4:

Now those who have been vouchsafed revelation aforetime did break up their unity (of faith) after such an evidence of the truth had come to them.

One could find evidence for the attitude of these people to God's Messengers by looking into their history (*apni tarikh ke ainah mein apne kirdar ko dekhien*, ibid).

Surah Al Zalzalah

This Surah explains that on the Last Day no human being will be able to hide anything, whether a good deed or a bad one, from the judgment of God. On that day, God will reward or punish each person (*jaza ya saza payega*, *ibid*, p. 489) and each will have to answer for himself without any assistance from another.

Islahi says that knowledge of the meaning of the earlier Surahs will make it easier to appreciate the importance of the warnings made in the present Surah (*is surah ke inzar ki ahmiyat ka andaza karne mein kuch zahmat nahin hogi*, *ibid*). Islahi provides a summary of the three main ways the unbelievers misunderstood the message (*in tinon mughalaton par*, *ibid*).

Surah Al 'Adiyat

Islahi says that the present Surah resembles the previous Surah in their subject matter regarding the Last Day when God will reward and punish according to his infinite knowledge (*allah ta'ala apne pure 'ilm ke sath har ek ka muhasaba karega aur har shakhs ko jaza ya saza dega*, *ibid*, p. 497). Islahi finds a difference between the Surahs in that the previous Surah presents an image (*taswir*, *ibid*) of the Last Day and the present Surah provides an argument (*dalil*, *ibid*) to explain it.

Islahi says that the charging horses mentioned in the first verse have a message for man:

Oh, the chargers that run panting.

Just as they obey their riders and remain faithful to their owners, so should man obey his Creator and Sustainer and remain faithful to God (*us ki bandagi aur us ke ahkam ki ata'at mein sargarm rahe*, *ibid*). By understanding verses 6-11 in a positive light, Islahi thereby attempts to provide a link between the positive imagery of the first five verses and the remaining verses. However, he disregards the fact these remaining verses express condemnation by understanding them as a kind of exhortation.²¹¹

²¹¹ Asad finds a link between the first six verses and the remaining verses of the Surah by interpreting the whole Surah in a quite different way. He says that a link between these two parts of the Surah must exist "and since verses 6-11 are undoubtedly condemnatory, we must conclude that the first five verses, too, have the same – or, at least, a similar – character. This character becomes at once obvious if we dissociate ourselves from the preconceived notion that the imagery of "the chargers" is used here in a laudatory sense. In fact, the opposite is the case. Beyond any doubt, "the chargers" symbolize the erring human soul or self – a soul devoid of all spiritual direction, obsessed and ridden by all manner of wrong, selfish desires,

Surah Al Qari'ah

This Surah states that the Last Day will surely come even though no one knows the hour of its coming. On that Day, God will weigh everything in his balance (*apni mizan-i- 'adl qaim karega*, ibid, p. 509). Islahi views the whole matter rather simplistically by saying the virtuous will enter heaven whereas the evildoers will go to hell. He stresses the fact that no person will be able to help another on that Day (*koi bhi kisi dusre ki madad kar sakne ki position mein na hoga*, ibid) – even though he provides no evidence for this view from the text of the Surah.

Surah At Takathur

This Surah is one of a pair with the previous Surah and so they have almost the same theme (*donon ki mazmun mein koi usuli farq nahin hai*, ibid, p. 519). The previous Surah referred to the balance which would be used on the Last Day to measure a person's good and bad deeds. The present Surah is a warning for those who spend their lives competing with others in the area of wealth and prestige (*ma'iyar-i-zindagi ki masabiqat mein*, ibid) – without giving a thought to the Day of Reckoning (*hisab kitab aur jaza o saza*, ibid) or to the way one is making use of God's blessings.

Surah Al 'Asr

The previous Surah is a warning to those who are so preoccupied with material things (*in logon ko tanbih farmai gayi hai*, ibid, p. 529) that death approaches before they have realized the purpose of life and without being aware of the way they have abused the opportunities they had. If they had realized the approach of the Last Day, they would have given up all this futile effort.

The present Surah asks about the real value of life (*zindagi ki asl qadr o qimat kiya hai?* ibid). Man should realize that his basic capital is time (*asli sarmaya jo use hasil hai bas wo thaura sa waqt hai*, ibid). Islahi reflects on how a person should avoid punishment in hell (*dozakh ke 'azab ka sazarar bhi bana sakta hai*, ibid). Islahi asserts that the three verses of this Surah

madly, unseeingly rushing onwards, unchecked by conscience or reason, blinded by the dust-clouds of confused and confusing appetites, storming into insoluble situations and, thus, into its own spiritual destruction." Asad (1980), p. 970, footnote 2.

express all that is contained in the one hundred and fourteen Surahs of the Qur'an (cf. *ibid*, p. 530).

Surah Al Humazah

The theme of this Surah is very similar to that of the previous Surah (*donon ke mazmun mein nihayat wazeh munasabat*, *ibid*, p. 543) because these two Surahs form a pair. The previous Surah says that those who encouraged one another to keep the truth and to have patience in adversity will prevail (*falah pane wale insanon ka kirdar*, *ibid*). The present Surah, in contrast, describes the behaviour of the person who amasses wealth and scoffs at those who stand up for the truth (*adae haquq ke ma'amle mein 'amlan o qaulan sargarm hai*, *ibid*). Islahi explains that the reason for such negative behaviour is quieting the voice of conscience (*zamir ko khiffat . . . duchar na hona pare*, *ibid*).

In order to provide a parallel verse (*nazair*), Islahi adds a lengthy discussion of verse 79 of Surah At Taubah, a verse about people who criticize those who make contributions for the cause of God (*anfaq*). His purpose is to find a connection between the first verse and the following two verses.²¹² Islahi concludes from his analysis of these two Surahs that slanderers (mentioned in verse 1) also include those with other moral weaknesses (*jo dusri akhlaqi kamzauriyon mein muhtala hote hain*, *ibid*, p. 545).

Surah Al Fil

Islahi sees a thematic link between this Surah and the following Surah Quraysh, which both form a pair of Surahs. The connection consists in the fact that both these Surahs are a warning to the Quraysh (*in ko ye tanbih farmaya gayi hai*, *ibid*, p. 555) concerning their duty to worship God, who has given them a secure place to live and provided them with sustenance. Islahi finds the same theme in verses 3-4 of the following Surah Quraysh (*ye mazmun age wali surah mein yun wazeh farma dia gaya hai*, *ibid*):

Let them, therefore, worship the Sustainer of this Temple, who has given them food against hunger, and made them safe from danger.

Islahi says that the only real difference between the two Surahs is that the present Surah relates an important observation concerning the spectacular

²¹² Asad is also aware that "the blameworthy attitude spoken of in verses 2-3 obviously belongs to a category entirely different from the two mentioned in verse 1." Asad (1980), p. 975, footnote 2.

way God protected the House of Worship (*is ghar ki hifazat ke liye apni kiya shan dekhai hai*, *ibid*) whereas Surah *Quraysh* relates how it was that the people of this region obtained their sustenance and their security by means of the House of Worship. God bestowed these blessings on the people in response to the prayer made by the Prophet Abraham. Subsequently, these people neglected their debt of gratitude to God and the Qur'an gives a frequent warning to this effect (*quran ne in ko jaga jaga tanbih farmai hai*, *ibid*). Surah *Al Balad*, of this Surah Group, also alludes to this fact. Islahi says the Surah is directed to the Quraysh (*zer-i-nazr surah mein quraysh ko . . . tawajjeh dilayi hai*, *ibid*, p. 556).

Surah *Quraysh*

Islahi says that this Surah is one of a pair with the preceding one and that both Surahs have the same theme (*ham donon suraton ke 'umud ki taraf ek jami' isharah kar chuke hain*, *ibid*, p. 569), which is to demand that the Quraysh fulfill their obligations to the House of Worship (*quraysh bait allah ke sath . . . fitri haq ka in se mutalbah kiya gaya hai*, *ibid*).

In the previous Surah it is made clear that the security, which the region enjoyed, was due to the House of Worship (*wo isi ghar ki badaulat hasil hai*, *ibid*). The present Surah also says that the sustenance and security of the region is due to the same House of Worship. The Surah tells the Quraysh that they were entrusted with the custodianship of this House of Worship (*ye ghar unhen khuda hi ne amanat mein dia hai*, *ibid*) but instead of worshipping the one God, they committed idolatry. If they do not perform their duty to God, they will lose the security and the sustenance that the House of Worship brings them.

Surah *Al Ma'un*

This Surah and the following Surah form a pair of Surahs. The theme of the preceding two Surahs is to remind the Quraysh of their duty to remember the purpose for which the House of Prayer was built and to be faithful to the mandate given to them to act as its custodians. The next pair of Surahs exposes the behaviour of the leaders of the Quraysh (*quraysh ke in lidaron ka kardar*, *ibid*, p. 579) and indicates that these leaders are no longer worthy of the trust given to them (*ahl nahin rahe ke allah ta'ala ke is muhtaram ghar ke mutawalla bane rahe*, *ibid*). They deserve, therefore, to be deposed

(*ma'zul hun*, ibid) so that this mandate can be transferred to those more capable and willing to perform this task.

Islahi proceeds to explain the verses of the Surah in terms of the Quraysh, even mentioning *Abu Lahab* by name (*isharah abu lahab ki taraf hai*, ibid). It is clear that Islahi finds a connection between the previous pair of Surahs and the present pair (*Al Ma'un* and *Al Kawthar*) because he understands all these Surahs in the light of the Quraysh and their failure to respect the purpose for which the House of Worship was built. He sees all the references that these Surahs make to human behaviour as a description of the leaders of the Quraysh.

Surah *Al Kawthar*

Islahi says that the previous Surah accused the leaders of the Quraysh of neglecting the purpose for which the House of Prayer was built, namely, to worship God and to provide support for the poor and the orphans (*ye ghar khudae wahid ki 'ibadat aur fuqara o yatama ke huquq ki hifazat*, ibid, p. 589). Since those presently in charge were giving attention to neither of these obligations, the previous Surah refused to accept them as the undisputed trustees of the House of Prayer.

The present Surah goes a step further by saying that, henceforward, the House of Prayer will be entrusted to the Prophet. Islahi draws this conclusion from the first two verses:

Behold, We have bestowed upon thee good in abundance: hence, pray unto thy sustainer (alone) and sacrifice (unto Him alone).

Accordingly, Islahi interprets the third verse to be a reference to fact that the blessings associated with the House of Prayer would now be taken from the leaders of the Quraysh (*wo tamam barkaton se mahrum ho jayenge*, ibid) and bestowed on those who were more worthy of them (*wo . . . us ghar ko us ke asl ibrahimi jamal se munawwar karenge*, ibid), namely, the Muslims. According to Islahi, the whole Surah is concerned with the transfer of custodianship for the House of Prayer.

Surah *Al Kafirun*

Islahi understands the Surah to have been revealed at a time when relations with the Quraysh had reached their final stage and the Prophet (peace be upon him) was about to abandon Mecca with his companions (*makka se*

niklne ka waqt ab qarib a raha hai, ibid, p. 603). Islahi says that the present Surah is well placed after Surah *Al Kawthar*, which had already announced the good news of the coming victory in Mecca (*fath makka ki basharat hai*, ibid). Before that victory was to take place, the Qur'an tells the Prophet (peace be upon him) and his companions about the migration and the struggles that must follow (*hijrat aur jang ke kathan marhale ane wale hain*, ibid). Islahi understands verse 80 from Surah *Bani Israil* as a parallel verse, which also refers to the migration.

The present Surah is tantamount to a proclamation of war (*ye sirf hijrat hi ki surah nahin balke ye ma'nan e'lan-i-jang ki surah bhi hai*, ibid, p. 602). Islahi condemns the Quraysh to their fate (*agar quraysh apni zid par qaim rahe to bilakhir us ka faislah talwar se hoga*, ibid, pp. 602-603). The Surah is clearly addressed to the Quraysh (*is surah mein un ko saf saf 'ai kafiro' ke alfaz se mukhatab kar ke*, ibid, p. 601). Since relations between the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the Quraysh were now over, the present Surah announces the Prophet's departure (*qati' ta'lluq aur barait ka e'lan kar dia gaya*, ibid). Islahi refers again to "the way of God" (*is sunnat ke mutabiq*, ibid) according to which a Prophet breaks off relations with his people after he has made every effort to preach the truth to them (*itmam hujjat*, ibid, p. 602).

Surah An Nasr

Islahi is of the opinion that this Surah was revealed to announce the imminent victory of the Muslims in Mecca (*fath makka se pahle us ki bahsarat ke taur par nazil hui hai*, ibid, p. 616). The reasons Islahi gives for this view revolve around the central mission of the Prophet, which is to crush the power of the Quraysh so that the House of Prayer may be restored to its original function (*millet-i-ibrahimi ki khususiyat se ma'mur o abad karna ap ke mission ka asli aur takmili kam tha*, ibid). The conquest in Mecca consisted in destroying the power of the Quraysh (*un ki taqat ko tor dena hi asl fath thiy*, ibid).

The present Surah refers to the victory that could take place only with divine assistance and according to "the way of God" (*sunnat-i-ilahi*, ibid) – after the migration of the Prophet. Islahi finds a parallel in the first three verses of Surah *Al Fath*:

Verily, (O Muhammad), We have laid open before thee a manifest victory, so that God might show His forgiveness of all thy faults, past

as well as future, and (thus) bestow upon thee the full measure of His blessings, and guide thee on a straight way, and (show) that God will succour thee with (His) mighty succour.

Surah Al Lahab

Another parallel can be found in verse 13 of Surah As Saff:

And (withal, He will grant you) yet another thing that you dearly love: succour from God (in this world), and a victory soon to come: and (thereof, O Prophet), give thou a glad tiding to all who believe.

According to Islahi, all these verses refer to the victory in Mecca (*us ka ta'lluq fath makka se hai*, *ibid*).

Hence, the present Surah follows naturally after the previous Surah, which also refers to the interconnections between migration of the Prophet, the divine assistance and the victory in Mecca (*hijrat, jihad aur fath o nusrat mein jo gahra rabat hai*, *ibid*, p. 615). Islahi brings all these aspects together in the concept of *hujjat tamam* (*ibid*), which he uses to explain the culmination of all the historical narratives of the Prophets.

Islahi introduces his discussion by quoting a passage from the commentary of Maulana Farahi about the theme and coherence of this Surah. In this quotation, Farahi says that the final stage of the Prophet's mission was completed with the return of the House of Prayer to its rightful function as the focus of the Abrahamic community (*khana ka'ba ke markaz-i-tauhid o islam aur sar chashma millet-i-ibrahim hone ke sabab se*, *ibid*, p. 627). He adds that the three Surahs that follow provide confirmation of these facts. Moreover, he says that the place of Surah *Al Lahab* among these last Surahs of the Qur'an must have its own significance; otherwise the coherence of these Surahs would be upset (*lazman kisi hikmat par mabni hoga warna ye pura silsilah nazm darham barham ho jayega*, *ibid*). The present Surah explains the victory mentioned in the previous Surah (*us ki wazahat o basharat*, *ibid*). Finally, Farahi provides a parallel from verse 81 of Surah *Bani Israil*.

Islahi is of the view that the present Surah was not revealed at the beginning of the Meccan period (*ye khayal sahih nahin hai ke ye bilkul ibtada'i makki daur mein nazil hui hai*, *ibid*, p. 630). It was revealed when the Prophet (peace be upon him) had completed his preaching to *Abu Lahab* (*jab us par*

hujjat tamam ki ja cuki hai, ibid). Islahi argues that the historical narratives of all the Prophets indicate that such a strong condemnation of *Abu Lahab* could not have occurred so early in the Prophet's mission (*da'wat ke bilkul aghaz hi mein*, ibid, p. 629).²¹³

Surah Al Ikhlas

This is one of those Surahs that indicate its subject matter by means of its title (*ikhlas hi us ka 'umud hai*, ibid, p. 643). Islahi uses various arguments to explain the position of the present Surah among these last Surahs of the Qur'an. Whereas Surah *Al Kafirun* had already expressed the theme of the unity of God, that particular Surah was directed to the Quraysh and the unbelieving Meccans (*us ka ta'lluq aslan quraysh aur mushrikin-i-makka se tha*, ibid).

The present Surah is more concerned about other Arab tribes living in the vicinity of Medina (*madinah aur is ke ataraf mein*, ibid) who were affected by various forms of idolatry (*shirk*, ibid). The People of the Book living in and around Medina were hoping that the Qur'an would consider them to be on a higher level than the unbelievers (*mushrikin ke muqabil mein kuch uncha darja dega*, ibid, p. 644). However, the Qur'an was so critical of the Christians that they joined forces with the Jews and the unbelievers in open conflict with Islam (*mushrikin, yahud aur nisara ne mil kar ek mutahidah mahaz islam ke khilaf qaim kar liya*, ibid). The present Surah was needed in this situation in order to make a final complete statement of the true doctrine of God for the sake of the unbelievers and the People of the Book (*donon par hujjat tamam kar de*, ibid). For this reason, the Surah was revealed in Medina (*madinah mein nazil hui*, ibid).

The death of *Abu Lahab* represented the removal of the main opposition to the truth (*ab haq ka sab se bara dushman khatm hua*, ibid). Hence, the proclamation of the unity of God could once again be made in the land where the Prophet Abraham had built the *ka'ba*. The present Surah thus logically comes after Surah *An Nasr* and Surah *Al Lahab* and it lays the foundation stone in its proper place (*is surah – ikhlas – mein islam ke bunyadi pathar – tauhid – ke is ke asli maqam mein nasb karne ka 'elan hai*, ibid). The two Surahs that follow the present Surah serve to confirm the

²¹³ This opinion of Islahi that such a strong condemnation of *Abu Lahab* by the Prophet (peace be upon him) could not have occurred so early in the Prophet's mission goes against the unanimous view of Muslim scholars.

message of the oneness of God (cf. *ibid*). Finally, Islahi finds a parallel to the message of the present Surah in the first Surah of the Qur'an: Surah *Al Fatihah* (cf. *ibid*, p. 645).

Surah Al Falaq

The previous Surah had said that the unity of God is the foundation of religion (*tauhid ko din ki asas ki haisiyat hasil hai*, *ibid*, p. 655). This is the reason why the Qur'an begins and ends with this concept. The two final Surahs of the Qur'an reiterate this concept (*tauhid ke pasban aur muhafiz ki haisiyat se*, *ibid*) and provide the believer with the means to hold fast to this essential principle of religion. Another reason why these final Surahs stress the oneness of God is that *shaytan* is making constant efforts to lead a person away from the path of *tauhid* by suggesting he commit *shirk* (*ibid*). A person must reject *shaytan* in order to come successfully through these trials (*imtehan*, *ibid*). Islahi quotes lengthy passages from Surah *An A'raf*, Surah *An Nisa* and refers to verses 61-65 of Surah *Bani Israil* as parallels (*nazair*). The present Surah stresses that a person must rely on God (*insan sirf apne rab ki panah dhundhe*, *ibid*, p. 657) in order to find protection from the attacks of *shaytan* (*shaytan ke fitnon se*, *ibid*).

Surah An Nas

The present Surah is one of a pair with the previous Surah so their themes are not substantially different (*donon ke 'umud mein koi bunyadi farq nahin hai*, *ibid*). The previous Surah already indicated the environment in which both these Surahs were revealed and indicated their subject matter (*us surah ke mauqa' o mahal aur us ke 'umud*, *ibid*, p. 671).

The present Surah is distinct because it mentions the attributes of God in which the believer can take refuge (*sifat ke tawassul se*, *ibid*) and which are directly related to human beings. The previous Surah makes its appeal by way of argument (*is par istadlal ka pahlu ghalib hai*, *ibid*) while the present Surah appeals more to feelings of mercy and compassion (*ziyadah numayan pahlu is mein istarham ka hai*, *ibid*). The previous Surah sought protection from all kinds of evils while the present Surah focuses on the evils brought by *shaytan* who is the root of all evils. Finally, the previous Surah speaks only of the jealousy of *shaytan* whereas the present Surah describes all the workings of *shaytan* so that human beings may be well prepared for his attacks.

Conclusions

The reason that Islahi mentions the division into seven Surah Groups at the beginning of volume eight of his commentary is to invite the reader to evaluate this division. He asks the reader for his or her considered opinion (*ap baihtar tariqa se faislah kar sakte hain ke ye raye kuch wazin rakhte hai ya nahin*, ibid, p. 480). My considered opinion is that Islahi has insufficient objective grounds for making such a division into seven Surah Groups because the theme and style of any one Surah Group of the Qur'an appears frequently in other Surah Groups as well. Hence, to divide the Qur'an into distinct groups of Surahs is to create artificial divisions that are not warranted by the text but are simply the result of the reader's perception.

In Surah Group Seven, Islahi is preoccupied with finding links *between* the Surahs. He does not avert to possible links *within* the Surahs. For instance, verses 1-5 and verses 6-11 of Surah *Al Adiyat* could be understood as the two parts of one coherent message but Islahi does not bring out the connection between these two parts. The links he finds *between* the Surahs usually consist of a word or phrase that is repeated in both Surahs. Such repetitions are not sufficient grounds for a theory of structural coherence.

In Surah Group Seven, Islahi repeats the same themes of victory for the Muslims and punishment for those who refuse to believe that he repeated so often in earlier Surah Groups. In fact, he seems to be obsessed with punishment in this world and in the next, which he says is the theme of the first Surah of this Surah Group, Surah *Al Mulk* (*is surah ka 'umud inzar hai aur us inzar mein donon hi 'azab shamil hai*, vol. 8, p. 481). He does not discuss the implications of such punishment "in this world" – except to mention the destruction of past nations. Nor does he suggest other ways in which such punishment might be implemented in society. Besides, other than describing the rather physical suffering of hell, Islahi does not explain the meaning of punishment "in the next world".

The final Surahs of the Qur'an have a unique style because they are so short and pithy and also because of the way they use language. Islahi has very little to say about this unique style except to remark that the Surahs differ in style from one Surah to the next (*tarz-i-bayan, nahj istadlal aur lab o lahja mein farq hai*, p. 505). He does not explain what the difference consists in.

By simply repeating the message of warning and punishment contained in these Surahs, Islahi misses the significance of the unique style in which this message is presented. As a result, he fails to convey the characteristic quality and tone of the Surah.

Islahi reduces the mission of the Prophet (peace be upon him) to a conviction that the Muslims will wrest ownership of the House of Prayer from the Quraysh (*ek din us ko in ke qabzah se azad karana bi'sat-i-muhammadi ki asl ghayat hai*, vol. 9, p. 590). In other words, the mission of the Prophet (peace be upon him) is limited to the time of revelation. Islahi is so preoccupied with the events of that period of history that he loses sight of any other historical period, including the present.

Islahi moves from a discourse based on actual historical events in the past to an abstract discourse based on general concepts like reward and punishment without recognizing the difference between the two kinds of discourse that are used. He does not take account of the symbolic and metaphorical style of the second kind of discourse.

Finally, on the basis of verses in these Surahs, Islahi denies the possibility of any assistance being given to another on the Last Day. He includes intercessory prayer in this kind of assistance. Most Muslims, however, accept the role of intercessory prayer, even on the Last Day and they find support for this view in the *Hadith*. Islahi does not include such *Hadith* in his deliberations.

General Conclusion

In his preface to *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*, Islahi said that he would discuss the verses of the Qur'an only to clarify their original intention (*asl mudda'a wazeh karne ke liye*, vol. 1, p. 41). Islahi also refers in his preface to the correct meaning of the verses (*sahih mafhum*, ibid) and to their true meaning (*haqiqi mafhum*, ibid, p. 42). Once the context has been established (*mauqa' o mahal ke ma'yyan ho janey ke ba'd*, ibid), the initial understanding (*ibtidai mafhum*, ibid) will emerge from the text (cf. ibid). Besides, in my introduction to this study, I noted that Islahi seeks to discover the original purpose and meaning of important concepts such as: *din*, *namaz*, *hijrah*, *hajj*, *jihad* and *islam* itself.²¹⁴

After completing my study of *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*, my conclusion is that Islahi has indeed presented the "original intention" and the "correct meaning" of the Qur'an in terms of the victory of the Muslims over the Quraysh. He relates everything in the Qur'an to this "correct meaning", according to which the mission of the Prophet (*anhazrat sall'aum ke maqaddas mishon*, ibid, p. 476) was to lead the Muslim community to form an Islamic society and government. The Qur'an provided the laws (*shari'ah*) this new society needed. God took away the mandate he had given to the Jews and the Christians and transferred it to the Muslims, who are the "best community" because they promote justice and truth in society. The perfect *din* (*islam*) has now been conveyed to the Muslims and the Inviolable House of Worship in Mecca has been returned to its rightful custodians.²¹⁵

Islahi's purpose in writing *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* is to argue that Muslims will once again experience their former success and power by adopting the

²¹⁴ Cf. my general introduction at the beginning of this study.

²¹⁵ I think Farid Esack has a very apt comment:

"The pre-eminence of the righteous does not mean a position of a permanently fixed socio-religious superiority for the Muslim community. It was not as if the Muslims as a social entity were superior to the other for such a position would have placed them and their parochial Allah in the same category of others who were denounced in the Qur'an for the crimes of arrogance and desiring to appropriate Allah for a narrow community. There is no reason to suppose that the Qur'anic reprimand to other communities that they cannot base their claims to superiority on the achievements of their forebears, should not be applied to the post-Prophetic Muslim community: 'That is a community that is bygone; to them belongs what they earned and to you belong what you earn, and you will not be asked about what they had done.' (Q. 2.134)." Esack (2001), p. 110.

action-plan outlined in the Qur'an.²¹⁶ Islahi demonstrates from the battle of *Badr* and the battle of *Uhud* that the struggle between truth and falsity is not only a spiritual struggle but involves a political struggle as well. *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* contains a clear and a strong promise of political supremacy for the Muslims. Islahi's emphasis on the *political* dimension of social reform (*islah*) may have been a reaction to the pre-eminence given to ritual prayer and other forms of piety.

Islahi communicates the message presented in *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* by adopting the following procedures:

1. He does not depart from the time of revelation – presenting the understanding of those who first read and recited the Qur'an as the model and criterion for subsequent interpretations. He is concerned only about the addressees living at the time of revelation and not about addressees living *after* the time of revelation.
2. He makes no attempt to indicate how the “original understanding” (*ibtidai mahfum*) of the Qur'an relates with the changed circumstances of the present time. In this way, Islahi has undermined the universality of the Qur'an.
3. Islahi's description of the context (*sahih mauqa' o mahal*)²¹⁷ is based on his own interpretation of the text because it is drawn entirely from the text of the Surah.²¹⁸ Even his references to Arab culture express his own perception.²¹⁹
4. Although Islahi considers the style and the flow of the argument (*uslub, andaz aur mawad istadlal*, vol. 5, p. 439) to be the distinctive mark of each Surah, he draws the meaning of the Surah entirely from its theme (*'umud*), which all the Surahs of a Surah Group share in common.²²⁰ Since everything depends on understanding the theme correctly, the style of a Surah has no significant role in interpretation.

²¹⁶ Islahi uses the word *naqsha* to indicate such an action-plan in his discussion of Surah *Al Hud*. Cf. vol. 4, p. 137.

²¹⁷ Cf. Surah *Al Ahzab*, vol. 6, p. 216. Islahi says the correct meaning of a verse depends on how one determines the context (cf. vol. 1, p. 42). For the use of *qarina*, cf. Surah *Ta Ha*, vol. 5, pp. 29-33.

²¹⁸ For example, Islahi explains the harsh punishment meted out to the sorcerers of Pharaoh's court who became believers according to verse 71 of Surah *Ta Ha* (cf. vol. 5, p. 66) according to his own understanding of ideological and political factors that he says were operating in that period of history. Islahi also provides an interpretation of verses 28-29 of Surah *Al Ahzab* concerning the wives of the Prophet based on his own understanding of the context (*in ayat ka pas manzar*, vol. 6, pp. 215-219).

²¹⁹ Cf. for example, the references to Arab customs in Islahi's discussion of Surah *Al Anbiya*, vol. 5, p. 163 and in his discussion of verses 19-21 of Surah *Al Muminun*, vol. 5, p. 307 do not provide external evidence.

²²⁰ *Jis tarah har surah ka ek ma'yyan 'umud hai isi tarah har grup ka bhi ek jami' 'umud hai jo pure grup par hawi hai*, vol. 9, p. 9.

5. In the preface, Islahi hints at the contribution that the reader makes when he refers to the disposition of heart that the reader should have (*parhne wale ka zahin baidar ho*, vol. 1, p. 42).²²¹ But Islahi is not critical of his own assumptions and the limited perceptions that he brings to the interpretation of the Qur'an. Moreover, by determining the theme ('*umud*) of the Surah Groups in advance, Islahi eliminates the contribution of each subsequent reader of the Qur'an.
6. Islahi formulates the theme ('*umud*) of a Surah Group in a few words. However, a short phrase to express what several Surahs have in common reduces the Surah to a one-dimensional perspective. This approach loses the multi-dimensional quality of each Surah conveyed by means of its style of expression.
7. Islahi argues that the Qur'an is coherent (*nazm al quran*) because he finds a common theme connecting all the Surahs. Islahi's argument depends on the literal application of certain words to the deposition (*ma'zul*) of the Jews and the Christians and the victory (*ghalbah*) of the Muslims in Mecca.
8. Since he does not offer criteria to distinguish the literal from the metaphorical use of language, Islahi is able to apply the narratives and the parables of the Qur'an to any specific agents in history that illustrate the particular message he wishes to convey. But metaphorical language cannot be restricted in this way.
9. Islahi makes constant use of ideas like *sunnat-i-ilahi*, *itmam-i-hujjat* and other concepts such as consolation (*tasalli*) for the Prophet (peace be upon him) and reward and punishment (*jaza o saza*) because such abstract concepts provide a synthesis of the historical narratives and so contribute to *nazm al quran*. Islahi uses such ideas as umbrella concepts to bring diverse aspects of the Qur'an together under one coherent theme ('*umud*).
10. Islahi does not respect the principles of Biblical exegesis but approaches the former Scriptures with the same principles of interpretation that he uses for the Qur'an. The result is that he often finds inexplicable contradictions between the Qur'an and the Bible.
11. Finally, the Qur'an as the Word of Allah is definitely absolute and certain (*qat'i*). But this quality of *qat'i* should be distinguished from

²²¹ In a similar vein, Islahi frequently refers to the right disposition of heart in the believer. In his discussion of Surah *Al Furqan*, Islahi says the Qur'an directs our attention to the abundant signs that exist in the world around us (*itni nishaniyan maujud hain*, vol. 5, p. 475). However, as was said in reference to history, these signs will profit only those who have the right disposition of heart (*jin ke andar suchne samajhne aur 'ibrat o nasihat hasil karne ka iradah paya jata ho*, *ibid*). I have discussed "The Natural Disposition of the Human Heart" in my discussion of Surah *Al Hud* in Chapter Three.

all human efforts at understanding (*zanni*) the Word. Since our attempts to understand the Qur'an are based on human effort, all these human efforts must fall under the category of *zanni*. For example, the search for the theme (*'umud*) of each Surah requires a capacity for sustained reflection (*tadabbur*). Similarly, all (and not just some) of the principles of interpretation that Islahi uses in his commentary should be called *zanni*. There seems to be no sound basis for the distinction between the internal and the external principles of interpretation that Islahi makes in his Preface to *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*.

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Suggestions for Further Study

Due to lack of space, I have not been able to discuss every topic mentioned in *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*. The topics listed below need further investigation. Islahi devotes several continuous pages to some of these topics, thereby indicating their significance to him. The topics listed below raise many questions that a separate study could profitably discuss further.

1. What is Islahi's understanding of allegorical and self-evident verses? Islahi devotes almost 10 pages to this topic in Surah *Al 'Imran*, vol. 2, pp. 24-33.
2. Islahi devotes 13 pages to discuss Islamic punishments in Surah *An Nur*, pp. and another 9 pages to the same topic based on verses 33-39 of Surah *Al Maidah*, vol. 2, pp. 505-514. Islahi's discussion leaves many questions unanswered.
3. What is Islahi's understanding of the role of the former Scriptures? I have dedicated a separate section on the former Scriptures in my discussion of Surah *Al Baqarah*. Islahi presents his views on passages from the former Scriptures in:
 - Surah *Al 'Imran* vol. 2, pp. 95, 98, 102, 144 and 221-222;
 - Surah *An Nisa*, vol. 2, p. 421 (six points);
 - Surah *Al Maidah*, vol. 2, p. 515 and p. 568.Islahi also does exegesis on the Psalms in Surah *Al Maidah*, p. 570 and on Mathew's Gospel in *ibid*, p. 572.
In several places Islahi discusses the role of St Paul in Christianity.
Finally, what exactly does Islahi mean by *tahrif*?
4. What is the relation between the *din* of Abraham and natural *din* (*din-i-fitrat*)? Cf. Surah *Al 'Imran* (*puri kainat ka din*, vol. 2, p. 136); *An Nisa* (vol. 2, pp. 367, 288 and 275) and Surah *At Taubah* (vol. 3, p. 570).
5. There are sections in his commentary on Surah *Al Baqarah* with headings such as:
 - a) Answers to Basic Questions, pp. 100-105
 - b) The Nature of Parables, pp. 129-133

- c) General Conclusions, pp. 170-174
- d) The Concept of Reform, pp. 202-203
- e) The Necessity for the People of the Book to Accept the Last Prophet, pp. 231-237
- f) The Concept of Abrogation, pp. 308-317
- g) Some Clarifications, pp. 147-151
- h) Historical Analysis, pp. 121-127
- i) The Sealing of Hearts (*khatm-i-qulub*), pp. 110-115.

Each of these sections raises important questions for further investigation.